



Quicksilver Summer

By

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"I don't need your company or your protection," Paddy told the autocratic Venn Wildash at their first meeting. But later she was to come to regret those hasty words and to hope against hope that she could gain Venn's love.

CHAPTER ONE

PADDY DEMPSTER didn't know, that warm night in late spring when the scent of orange blossom was breaking in waves over the dusty little town of Gidgeemallawa, just what she was starting.

All she knew was that she was too restless to spend the evening alone - that if she didn't go out somewhere and divert herself, she would never sleep. Standing at the gate of Mrs. Frank's house, staring out at a road washed blue by the starlight - a road that led to the empty flatness of everlasting plains whichever way you took - she felt like a wild young animal, or a tree whose sap was rising. She wanted badly to throw open her arms to a love that

wasn't there. Phil was hundreds of miles away in Sydney and she hadn't heard from him for two whole weeks, and tonight it seemed impossible to sit down in solitude and write secret poetry to relieve her feelings.

So what was she to do? All that distance - all those miles - and the long summer vacation still weeks away...

She jumped as the wire screen door on the verandah banged shut and Mrs. Frank came through the pepper trees towards the gate.

"What's up, Paddy? Thinking about your boy-friend in Sydney? Forget about him, and go out and enjoy yourself! When you've been married a few years you won't think he was worth moping over, I can tell you. I suppose he wouldn't object if you came along with me now and again, would he?"

Paddy, who had turned to face her, smiled ruefully. "No, of course he wouldn't. But-"

"Well then - I'm off to Greg Marlow's tonight. What about coming too?"

Paddy bit her lip. She felt edgy, nervy, disturbed by her unfulfilled longings. Maybe it was just plain ordinary loneliness. She had been teaching in Gidgeemallawa for over two months now, ever since the end of the spring vacation, and in all that time, because of Phil, she hadn't mixed around socially. Her leisure had been lightened by nothing more exciting than occasional tea with one of the mothers of her six-year-old pupils, cold drinks at the Golden Key Cafe with some of the teachers, or a game of cards at the headmaster's home. Mostly it had been loneliness and letters, letters, letters,

and living from day to day for the postman's visit. At first she had hated Gidgeemallawa because it had torn her so roughly out of context, but lately, despite the red dust and the emptiness, and perhaps because the orange orchards all around had come into bloom, she had a stirring sense of almost belonging. All the same, in her heart she was quite sure she wouldn't be coming back here after the summer vacation. She would marry Phil and stay in Sydney with him.

So perhaps - perhaps Mrs. Frank was right, and one day she would wish that she had gone out while she could.

She looked at Mrs. Frank who was jingling her car keys in her hand. Behind her, on the lighted end of the verandah, she could see Mr. Frank - Freddy - sitting reading the sporting pages of the paper, preparing no doubt for his next bout of betting on the horses, and she moved restlessly.

"Well, could I come? Would it be all right? Is it just a dance?"

"Oh, it's the usual thing. Dancing and supper and fooling about," said Mrs. Frank casually. She went to most parties in the district because she played piano with the local dance band. As well, there was Les who played violin and young Charlie who played drums, guitar or piano accordion, being very versatile. Paddy had never met or even seen Les and Charlie, who were father and son, but she had heard about them often enough. Mrs. Frank began to move towards her car, a slightly battered old Holden parked beneath a cedar tree, half on and half off the dirt footpath. "Jenny Marlow's

announcing her engagement to the jackeroo from Belah Springs tonight, I believe, so there'll probably be some people in from the big sheep stations around. You'll enjoy yourself." She opened the car door and looked back. "Are youu coming?"

Paddy hesitated. "Perhaps I shouldn't. I mean, it sounds like a private party-"

"Oh, fiddle! Everyone who wants to come will be there, and there'll be plenty to eat. No one will even notice. I'll tell them you've come with me to turn over the pages, if they ask.. But you needn't worry, they won't ask, and I'll bet the men will be around you like flies around a honeypot."

"I hope not," said Paddy, suddenly cheerful. "I'll come anyhow." She climbed into the car beside Mrs. Frank with a feeling of excitement at the thought of people, music, dancing - laughter. She had been lonely for too long and she was feeling it more because Phil hadn't written. But she honestly didn't want the men around her like flies around a honeypot, and of course she didn't believe they would be. It wasn't as if she were a raving beauty, or even the slightest bit glamorous...

Grey Marlow's orange orchard was only a few miles out of town, and at first, Paddy was so intent on enjoying the scent of the orange blossom that she thought of nothing else. Then, as they drove past the orchard, lying behind the wire fence, she saw lights in a long shed and heard voices, and Mrs. Frank said,

"The packers are in - there are still oranges being picked. Lovely smell, isn't it? Though a bit overpowering to live with."

Paddy didn't agree. She loved it.

Les and Charlie had arrived ahead of them, and Mrs. Frank pulled in behind their car under the gum trees just off the drive, with the remark, "Have to leave the best places for the guests." She found her music and hurried ahead to join the other two who were climbing the steps to the verandah. Paddy, hanging back, was suddenly aware that she was going to feel an intruder. Besides which - oh heavens! She glanced down at herself in dismay. As usual, she had forgotten about her clothes. All her stepmother's efforts to make her clothes-conscious had failed, and here she was in jeans and a striped shirt of rather fragile Indian cotton, her bare toes showing in their emerald green sandals. No make-up at all, and her short black hair with its upturned ends just a little bit wild. Hardly party gear!

By now, Mrs. Frank was standing on the verandah with the two men, and a girl in a long silky skirt and a sketchy sleeveless top and swinging amber ear-rings appeared in the open doorway, and they all went inside. Paddy was completely forgotten. Mrs. Frank didn't even look around to see where she was before she disappeared into the house.

Well, business came first...

"So what do I do now?" Paddy wondered. She stayed where she was for a while in the shadow of some oleanders, but Mrs. Frank didn't come back, and

that girl in the long skirt didn't appear to welcome her and say, "Oh, Mrs. Frank said she'd brought along a friend. You must come inside - and look, I'll lend you one of my long dresses."

That would have solved the problem nicely, but it just didn't happen. The fact of the matter was, Mrs. Frank probably thought, if she thought at all, that Paddy was fully adult. - twenty-two and a fully fledged infants' teacher and a long way from home - and could look after herself.

When the cars began to arrive and the guests came hurrying up to the house, Paddy moved further away where the verandahs weren't so brightly lit, and where there were lots of dark tree shadows and concealing shrubs. It didn't look as if she were going to have such a social evening after all.

Still, she didn't have to isolate herself completely, and if she couldn't join in, she could still watch, and surely that was something. The party took no time in getting under way, the dance music could soon be heard, trays of drinks appeared, and the front verandah and the room behind it were crowded and colourful. Paddy began to think she might find it entertaining to watch and to speculate . After a while she found herself a comfortable seat on the lower branches of a large pepper tree where although she was hidden, she had a great view of one end of the verandah where most of the dancing was happening. She soon decided that the girl in the amber earrings was Jenny Marlow, and the tall thin young man with the longish dark hair was her jackeroo. A small crowd of men and girls came to kiss Jenny, and the girls all

kissed the jackeroo as well. After a while they all went off to dance except four girls who stood by the verandah rail in the soft light of the swinging rose and mauve paper lanterns.

Suddenly, infinitesimally, their heads turned, and they were self-consciously alert. Paddy, whose view was limited, wondered who was about to appear. It was like waiting for the leading man to appear in a play. And when he came, she thought he filled the role very well, for he was quite strikingly handsome in his white shirt and dark pants. He asked one of the girls to dance, and they disappeared together, while the three who were left looked after them enviously.

For no particular reason, except to amuse herself, Paddy watched for him to reappear. It was not difficult to pick him out, and she saw him dance several times, always with a different girl. So if he was married - and by rights he should have been, for he looked to be in his mid thirties - then he wasn't paying much attention to his wife! She had a chance to study him later, when he stood for a minute or so talking near the verandah rail. He was tall, "broad-shouldered, conventional in his white shirt and dark trousers, and yet with a rugged individuality, a strength, about his tanned face with its slightly cleft chin and the thick dark blond hair that smouldered with a soft fire in the light of the coloured lanterns.

For just a second, Paddy caught herself thinking, "If it wasn't for Phil, I could fall for him-" And then, taking in the quite fatuous expression on the

pretty face of the girl he next asked to dance, she reflected cynically, "Isn't he popular - and doesn't he know it!"

Well, she decided presently, she wasn't going to sit here with her eyes glued to him all night. Besides which, her limbs were feeling cramped. She clambered down from her tree and made her way quietly and discreetly round the house. Here the verandah was deserted and almost dark, and she could see a rather decorative garden chair where she could relax for a few minutes and decide how she was going to spend the rest of the evening. It might be a good idea to find the kitchen and explain her predicament. She might find Mrs. Marlow or whoever it was that was in charge of the supper. She would confess how she came to be there, admit to being thirsty, and as well, offer to help - behind the scenes, as it were, where her clothes didn't matter. Yes, that was definitely a bright idea. Meanwhile, she spotted a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches on the verandah rail, and though she rarely smoked, just now it was something to do, and she lit up, relaxed in the chair, and tried to summon the strength to put her plan into action.

But the cigarette was strong and not in the least enjoyable, and in a very short time she was on her feet and determined to make a move.

"Who's he dancing with now?" she wondered irrelevantly, when she suddenly realized she was no longer alone. A white shirt slashed by a dark tie showed up a few feet away and her heart gave a startled jump. Ridiculously, she thought, "It's him! Surely I'm not the lucky one this time!"

However, it wasn't 'him', she realized swiftly as the man stepped closer. He lurched very slightly, he was not so tall, and she had an impression of thick curly hair.

"Enjoying my cigarettes?" His voice was faintly blurred, distinctly Australian.

Not very much," said Paddy. "It's not a brand I particularly like. You'll have to forgive me for taking one..."

"Sure I'll do that. No trouble at all."

Paddy made a move to pass him, because she had the distinct feeling that he had been drinking, but he barred the way with his body. She hesitated, uncertain what to.

"Who would you be?" he wanted to know. His face was no more than a blur in the darkness, and of course he could not make her out either.

She said lightly, "Who do you think?"

"Guessing game? Well, let's see, I haven't been around these parts all that long. You've got a "nice" voice - you could even qualify for Venn Wildash's harem. Are you part of it, by any chance? - a kind of advance guard?"

"No, I'm not," said Paddy coolly. She hadn't the least idea what he was talking about, and she didn't care much. "I'm not interested in belonging to anyone's harem. And now would you please let me get by?"

"Oh, hang on. I bet you're as pretty as you sound - and I bet you're good to kiss." Before she could make a dive past him, he had whipped the cigarette

from her fingers, tossed it over the rail, and wrapped his arms around her in a kind of inescapable bear's hug.

Paddy struggled uselessly, acutely conscious of the heat, the sweat of his body, gasping against the determination of his mouth as he strained her to him. She had little to counter his male strength, but she dug her nails hard into his back, and when he moved fractionally to draw a grunting breath she made an effort to wrench herself away. Instantly, he grabbed himself a handful of her flimsy blouse and she felt it rip. One wrist was circled with steel and she heard her own quick panting breath in little overlapping waves on the warm night air, an all too human accompaniment to the distant sound of dance music. Then, before her mind, jumping like a circus lion through hoops of fire - looking for a course of evasive action - could settle on anything, other fingers, cool and hard and compelling, had gripped her upper arms, and over her head a steely masculine voice said unemotionally, "Get moving, Keith. If you must have a brawl, look for it elsewhere - outside."

Slowly - yes, in a kind of slow movie action that was incredible and almost laughable, "Keith" let Paddy go. He shook his head as if to clear it, jerked his tie straight, then unexpectedly vaulted over the verandah rail and disappeared among the dark tree shadows.

Paddy breathed again, then, suddenly aware of the rip, almost from shoulder to waist, in her striped shirt, put up a hand to cover it, to draw the

edges together, before turning to thank her rescuer. At the same instant she was pulled round abruptly to face him, and all but lost her balance.

Before she could say a single word, he had rapped out sharply, "What kind of a girl are you, hunting up trouble for yourself this way? Do you belong down in the shed with the packers? If so, why the hell don't you stay there? This is a private party, sweetheart - gatecrashers are liable to be thrown out."

Paddy blinked at the attack, and a chill ran down her spine. She had the distinct feeling that this was the man she had watched so intently not very long since, and she felt her heart begin to thump uncomfortably. She pulled away from him, suddenly too conscious of the warm pressure of his fingers on her arms.

"I'm not a gatecrasher and I don't belong with the packers," she said fiercely, staring at him through the darkness.

"No? All the same, I'll swear you're not an invited guest." He took a cigarette lighter from the pocket of his dark pants and flicked it on. Deliberately he held it towards her and in the light of the nervy blue and gold flame, he looked her over, taking in the tear in her blouse, her casual jeans, her sandals. Then her face and her shining short black hair that she knew very well could do with a good combing out.

In return, Paddy looked back at him. And sure enough, he was the man who'd made the heads of all the girls turn. This close, she saw more than a very attractive man in his middle thirties. He had a strong face, square-jawed,

very masculine. His eyes were a disconcerting glinting aquamarine under thick level eyebrows that were impressively black, and there were lines - of experience, of a struggle, even perhaps of laughter too - on either side of a mouth that somehow drew her eyes with its long curve.

"You're not a guest in that gear - even without such an indecent rip," he pronounced briefly. And extinguished the light.

Paddy's cheek flamed. "Did I ever say I was a guest? If you must know, I - I came with the band - with Mrs. Frank - to turn over the pages -"

She heard his low laughter. "Good God! You must be clean out of inventive ideas to try to pull that one. I've never heard such a ludicrous or invalid excuse!"

"I can't help that," Paddy flared. "Anyhow, is it your business? Is this - is this your show? Is it your engagement party?"

"No, it's not. But that's hardly the point. We just don't encourage girls like you to hang around in the dark."

Girls like you! Paddy was both furious and confounded. Of course she had no real right to be here, she had been crazy to come, and it was no use blaming it on spring and restlessness and the scent of orange blossom. Or even on the fact that she hadn't heard from Phil for two long weeks. All the same, it wasn't her fault that Keith had made a pass at her, and she thought that at least she could bring that fact to the notice of this shatteringly crushing, and domineering, male. She put her chin up and kept her voice steady as she said,

"I resent your tone, and I resent your implications. I did come with Mrs. Frank, and maybe it was a mistake. But I hardly expected at such an exclusive party that people would get disgustingly drunk and go round grabbing girls."

"One drunk - and not really drunk at that - and one girl," he corrected chillingly. "Who was, I repeat, hanging round in the dark. There's an old saying - I don't know if you've heard it - He who seeks after mischief shall find it."

Paddy said nothing. She tried to detach her mind and concentration from this man who was so determined to think the worst of her. She thought aloofly that when he had quite finished with her - if not before - she would go and sit in the peace and quiet of Mrs. Frank's car. For sure, she couldn't risk having anyone see her now, with her shirt ripped so indecently as she had just been told...

However, it appeared she wasn't even to have the privilege of making that decision. To her annoyance she was told, "You'll go out to Mrs. Frank's car and you'll sit there like a good girl till the party's over. Which won't be for a long time yet, so you should find it both boring and chastening."

Paddy, by now almost choked with fury, somehow forced herself to continue to say nothing, and when he made to take hold of her arm, she shook him off sharply and moved of her own accord along the verandah in the direction of the steps. He followed relentlessly. She could hear his firm tread, and when it continued still as she passed under the delicate fronds of

some pepper trees, she flung back over her shoulder, "I don't need either your company or your protection, thank you."

"You'd rather have the thrills and spills, would you?" he mocked, and drew level with her. "Let's not think of it like that, anyhow. Let's just say I'm making sure you really do get into that car."

Confused, and wishing now that she had kept quiet, Paddy took the wrong direction, and at once he hustled her. "This way - you'd know if you were telling the truth."

Paddy opened her mouth. Say nothing, she warned herself silently, and brought her teeth down firmly on her lower lip. His fingers had closed around her arm again and she felt a shiver go through her. They reached Mrs. Frank's car and he opened the door into the back seat and waited while she climbed in. Her heart was beating hard and she was very much aware of the indignity of her position, and she resented it. She was, after all, a respectable girl - a schoolteacher - decidedly not someone out in search of an amorous adventure. She wished futilely that she could think of something to say that would cut this high-handed man down to size, make him regret his treatment of her. But there appeared to be nothing. Simply to protest that she had already decided to sit in the car would be completely unconvincing. She clung resignedly to the dignity of silence and hoped that it would confound him, though she suspected it would not. She kept her face averted while he closed

the door firmly, and was sure that if he could have, he would have locked her in,

"I see there's a cotton rug in there. I suggest you wrap yourself up in it and see if you can go to sleep and forget the romantic adventures."

Paddy didn't even look at him. She waited a few seconds, then cautiously turned her head. He had gone, and she sat back with a sigh of relief, releasing her pent up feelings by saying aloud with some vehemence, "I hate you, whoever you are! And however many girls are waiting about just fainting for you to ask them to dance - I wouldn't say yes in a fit!"

"Very interesting." He was back, and his voice was dry and sardonic. Paddy sat up a straight, and though her cheeks burned she thought, "Serve you right. Listeners never hear any good of themselves."

"I apologize for eavesdropping on your touching little monologue. I came to warn you I'll be back - to bring you something to eat."

"You needn't bother.. I'm not hungry. I didn't come here to get a free meal."

"I hadn't supposed that was your main object," he agreed cynically. "But you might change your mind about being hungry. You're going to have a long wait, and I don't suppose you'll sleep it out. I'll be along in any case."

"To check up on me," thought Paddy.

This time she watched him go, and when she had seen his silhouette against the lighted doorway, she relaxed. She couldn't go and offer her services in the kitchen now - not with her shirt torn. But all the same she wasn't going to sit

out here on her own for hours and hours. If it had been her own decision, it would have been different. But she had no intention of taking orders from that horrible man. She groped for the cotton rug, folded it carefully, and draped it around her shoulders like a shawl. She would walk back into town - and if that man came back to check on her, he would find her gone.

She opened the car door and stepped out. It was a beautiful night. Overhead the sky was burning with stars that were big and close against their background of deep and infinite indigo. She walked quietly in the direction of the house, keeping carefully in the blackness of the tree shadows. She could smell the orange blossom and she thought of Phil and wished that he had been here with her tonight instead of that bossy man.

And at that moment she walked straight into someone.

Him.

He was carrying a tall glass mug and a plate that held food, and he cursed softly as some of the contents of the mug - obviously beer, by the smell of it - splashed on to his shirt and on to Paddy's hand that clutched the rug. She felt herself stiffen and a pulse began to hammer at her temple as he snapped out,

"Didn't I tell you to stay in the car?"

"You did - but you don't have the right to tell me to do anything," said Paddy tightly. "I'm not your prisoner. And if that beer is for me, I don't drink it. I told you I didn't want supper. It's not provided for gatecrashers," she

added flippantly. "You're only bringing it as an excuse to check up on me, anyhow."

"I don't need an excuse," he said calmly. "Certainly I was checking up on you, but I thought you might appreciate a little nourishment as well."

"I wouldn't," she flashed. "And I'd be out of my mind to sit in that car for hours just to please you. I'm walking back to town, but I wanted to let Mrs. Frank know. You might tell her for me and save me the trouble."

He ignored that. "You're not walking back into town by yourself."

"But I am," she interrupted. "Quite by myself."

"I'll drive you back," he said after a moment.

"Don't bother being chivalrous. You're only dealing with a girl - a girl like me."

She saw his eyebrows rise, but he let that pass. "All the same, you'll come in my car. That way, I'll know you've gone. And I don't really think Mrs. Frank will be interested either way."

So he didn't even believe she had come with Mrs. Frank. Paddy sighed exasperatedly and gave up. As for his driving her back to town - well, all right, if he was going to insist, she might as well make use of him.

She followed him edgily along the line of cars and discovered that his was a large dusty station wagon. Before he opened the door for her, he disposed of the supper he had brought her by putting it carefully on the ground under the trees. Chicken patties, thought Paddy, with fleeting regret...

They had left the orange orchard and travelled a couple of hundred yards along the dark country road when he asked her briefly, "Where do you live?"

"In Gidgeemallawa," she told him aloofly. "You can drop me down anywhere in the main street."

"I didn't mean Gidgeemallawa," he said after a moment. She glanced at his profile and found it - annoyingly - as good to look at and as strong as any angle of his face. "You're English, aren't you? That accent of yours wasn't instilled at some private school. But you're not with your family?"

"No, I'm not with my family." Paddy wasn't going to start chattering about herself to satisfy his curiosity.

"On your own, then. One of the restless, standardless young - discovering the world - finding out about Australia." He waited and Paddy said nothing. He was going to make up a whole life story for her! Wasn't that great? "God knows what made you fetch up at Gidgeemallawa. It's hardly the hub of the west. What do you hope to find here? Romance? The love affair to end all love affairs? In other words, a man?"

"If it's of any interest to you, no. I already have one of those back in Sydney."

He considered that, his eyes on the road. "So your little venture tonight had absolutely no connection with-"

"With anything you can think up," Paddy retorted, goaded into annoyance. "I told you before, I came to-"

"To turn over the pages," he mocked.

They had reached the town now, and Paddy seized hold of the door handle, only to discover that she didn't know how to turn it. "Let me out here, please," she ordered.

"With pleasure." He slowed down, pulled in to the kerb, and flicked on the light. Paddy wrestled with the door catch. "Relax," he told her irritatingly. "You're in no danger."

She turned to face him. "I didn't think I was." She stopped, and for an endless moment, time stood still. Her eyes had encountered his, directly and unexpectedly. Human eye looked into human eye, unblinkingly, exploringly, and the deep, sea blue colour of his irises startled and dazzled her. She was aware of an instant of strange bafflement - as though she had glimpsed something that she almost recognized. And then she had blinked, he had moved, reaching across her to open the door, and the moment had vanished.

"Thanks," said Paddy as her feet touched the pavement.

She clutched the cotton rug around her rather ridiculously.

"You're welcome," he said briefly. He pulled the door shut and drove off, and she was alone in the deserted main street of Gidgeemallawa. It was still and quiet and very, very empty.

"Well, I shan't ever see him again," she thought, and began to walk quickly along the pavement, accompanied by the sound of her own lonely footsteps. A few big moths, a few beetles flew around the street lights, and there was

still the scent of orange blossom on the air. Paddy turned the corner, walked past the swimming pool, crossed the road and opened the gate into the small park where the town tennis courts were. Mrs. Frank's timber bungalow was in the street on the other side of the park, one of a row of similar bungalows, iron-roofed, with a garden hidden behind privet hedges or pepper trees or wilgas.

No lights shone from number fourteen, and Paddy crossed the garden under the trees. The air near the house was warm and still and faintly scented, and she thought with an odd thankfulness, "I'm home." Mr. Frank, who counted for nothing in his wife's eyes, had either gone out with his cronies or was in bed asleep. He had once been a violinist and played with the dance band too, but Mrs. Frank made no secret of the fact that he disappeared into the hotel so often to have a drink between dances that he was worse than useless. Paddy didn't try the front door, though it was probably not locked, for no one seemed to lock up in Gidgeemallawa. Instead, she slipped down the side path by the tamarisk trees until she reached the narrow gap between the bathroom and the main part of the house. If you were slim - and Paddy was slim - you could slip in between the two sections of the house, then squeeze through the screen door on to the verandah. There was no insect screen on the bathroom side, which meant, as she had recently discovered, that in warm weather the bathroom was full of mosquitoes. And how they hummed and bit and stung!

Paddy's small rather Spartan bedroom opened, off the verandah. She hadn't yet succumbed to sleeping on the verandah where it was cooler, but no doubt she would, once summer had come. She closed her door behind her and switched on the light, her eyes going immediately, through habit, to the studio photograph of Phil that stood on the old-fashioned dressing table. The drabness of the room didn't matter while Phil was there looking at her, half smiling, his eyes direct, friendly - so familiar that her heart was warmed instantly. She smiled back at him, then glanced briefly at her own reflection in the mirror above the photograph. Her storm grey eyes widened. She had tossed down the cotton rug and through the tear in her shirt she could see her tea-rose bra and a strip of white flesh. That was what he had seen when he had looked her over with the aid of his cigarette lighter.

Horrible type, she thought, impatient that he should intrude when all she wanted was to think of Phil. She glanced at the photograph again and asked ruefully beneath her breath, "Why haven't you written, Phil? Is there a postal strike or something?"

When she was ready for bed, on impulse she sat down at the small table by the window and scribbled off a letter to Phil. For some reason she didn't write a word about the night's adventure. It was something, she told herself, that she preferred to forget - because it had given her self esteem a bit of a knock.

It was another week before she heard from Phil. By that time she had become quite obsessed with the postman, and on that particular morning she

listened for his whistle as she moved slowly around the classroom supervising the writing exercise she had given her class of six year-olds.

Spring had vanished with a suddenness that was unbelievable, the orange blossom had all but gone, and it had become hot, desperately hot. Gidgeemallawa seemed scarcely to breathe, lying passive and exhausted under a burning sun. Paddy thought longingly of the coast and of the beaches she had learned to love since she had come with her father and her brand new stepmother, Norma, to live in Australia, five years ago. Her growing, half-tolerant affection for the west and for Gidgeemallawa was swamped by the despair generated by Phil's strange silence. She had not even heard from his mother, Mrs. Kennedy, either, which was just as strange, because her home had been with the Kennedys in the eighteen months since her father had died of a heart attack. Norma, who had never really liked Australia, had gone back to England to live, but Paddy had wanted to stay, particularly since she was in her final year of teachers' college. So Norma had arranged for her to board with Mrs. Kennedy, a widow with one son, Phil, almost through his course in Commerce.

Maybe proximity helps, but she and Phil had seemed to click from the word go. Paddy quite simply felt at home with him, as she did with his mother. They had never actually reached the stage of being engaged, and to be honest, she had hoped when she was suddenly transferred to Gidgeemallawa, towards the end of her first teaching year, that Phil would

say, "You can't go - it's too far away. Stay here and marry me and let the Education Department find you another suburban post." But he hadn't said that, and off Paddy had gone on the long train journey. How she had hated Gidgeemallawa at first! It was her only experience of an outback Australian town, and at first she could hardly believe it, because she still remembered the pretty little villages in England, the green fields, and the lovely leafy, shady lanes of summer. There were no leafy lanes in Gidgeemallawa, and there was nothing you could call pretty about the small town set down on the endless western plains. It was teeming with rain the day Paddy arrived and the town with its wide unpaved streets was swimming in red mud. The rain went on for a week, and Paddy stayed unhappily at the Federal Hotel while she looked for somewhere less impersonal. She wrote to Phil almost every day, and wished with a sick and lonely heart that Australia wasn't so big. It had put so many hundreds of uncomfortable miles between them that they might have been living in different worlds.

But she was an adaptable girl, and once the rain had stopped, and the skies were blue and the sun shone in the sky - and the green grass began to grow - she began to cheer up. She moved into Mrs. Frank's house, settled down to teaching her class, and got to know some of the other teachers, and began to feel happy. Phil wrote, his mother wrote, and she had letters from college friends - from Judy who was teaching on the Southern Highlands and loving it, from Diana who was still in Sydney, and keeping an eye on Phil. Then the orange trees flowered, poetry welled up in Paddy's heart and she

felt stirrings of affection for this brave little town with its brown river and tall gum trees, its laconic townsfolk and easy-going ways. If she hadn't mixed around much, it was from choice, because she was a bird of passage, and her real life was in Sydney - with Phil.

And now, since her little venture on to the fringe of its social life, and her undignified encounter with Keith and the other man whose name she still didn't know - for he had passed on her message to Mrs. Frank through Jenny Marlow - she had retreated to the confines of her own small world again. True enough, she couldn't forget, for there was the constant prickle at the back of her mind of having been misjudged, thought badly of, but that, she supposed, time would heal.

On this hot, still and suddenly summerish morning, as she moved slowly between the small desks, she heard the postman's whistle, and felt in her bones that she would have a letter from Phil. Then the world would start turning at its usual pace and she would begin to realize that after all it was not long before she would be packing her belongings and taking the train back to Sydney. For seven weeks, or maybe for ever!

The first assistant, Mr Oliver, brought her her mail during recess as she stood under the pepper trees drinking a cup of tea. One letter, and - yes, it was from Phil! Quickly, Paddy handed cup and saucer to a hovering child, and with fingers that trembled and fast beating heart she tore open the envelope.

She didn't know what she had expected, whether deep down she had feelings of apprehension, or whether she had honestly believed a letter simply meant a miraculous return to normal. But 'Dear Paddy,' she read, "Sorry if I've been neglecting you lately. I hadn't realized it was so long since last I wrote. I feel a bit guilty, .but Diana says I'm mad, that you've probably been having a great time with all those wealthy squatters you're sure to meet out west. Anyhow, to come to the big news - Di and I are getting engaged ! I wanted you to know before we announced it to the world at large, and to tell you we both look forward to seeing you in the vacation and receiving your blessing. And your forgiveness if you feel that way. You'll always be my favourite sister, and I'll never forget the good times we had together...'

Paddy stopped reading. She felt as though a bullet had gone straight through her heart leaving her numb, blank, incredulous. And then suddenly her mind was chaos. My favourite sister -the good times we've had together - and Diana - Diana who had said so cheerfully that she'd keep an eye on Phil... How could it have happened? How could it? And Diana had persuaded Phil that Paddy was enjoying herself with - oh!

She was suddenly blinded by tears. She couldn't read the rest of what Phil had written now, she didn't even want to, she had had enough. The school bell had rung and it was time to take her class inside - and it would never do for the children to see their teacher crying! Paddy dashed away her tears savagely and moved automatically across the playground in the direction of

the infants' classrooms. It appeared she had been mad to think that Phil was in love with her. He thought of her as a sister. Had he really? Was that why he had never asked her to marry him, not even when she was sent away to Gidgeemallawa? Then why hadn't she wakened up to it ages ago? She wasn't stupid. Why hadn't she gone out enjoying herself - instead of racing off exactly once to a party she hadn't been invited to attend?

She cut her thoughts off at that point. Small children require concentration and Paddy was a conscientious teacher. With an effort, she pushed her personal life to the very back of her mind and forced herself to give her full attention to her class.

It wasn't till she went home after school that day that her self-control left her. Mrs. Frank was in the sittingroom giving a piano lesson to some child, and Paddy went quickly and silently to her bedroom. She read her letter through again and this time she thought violently, "I can't possibly meet them again in the holidays - I can't possibly go home and sleep in "my" room - knowing that Phil's in the next room, or maybe out with Diana - kissing Diana!" In effect, she reflected, dry-eyed, staring at nothing, she had lost her home. This was home now - here with Mrs. Frank. She would have to stay here for the long summer vacation. Was it possible? Was it bearable?

"I'm not ready to think about it now," she decided as she took her soap and towel and headed for the mosquito busy bathroom to take a tepid bath.

Freddy hadn't come home when she went in to dinner that night, so she and Mrs. Frank were alone, and Paddy pulled herself together and somehow gave an appearance of acting normally, laughing at Mrs. Frank's anecdotes about her various music pupils.

"Jimmy Nye never does five minutes' practice from one lesson to the next, and each time he comes to a bar he can't play - and that's pretty often, believe me - he breaks off and takes a swing at an imaginary mosquito. "Just missed it, Mrs. Frank!" If you've heard that, you probably thought he was talking about the note-"

"I did wonder," said Paddy, smiling brightly.

"What's up, Paddy?" asked Mrs. Frank after a second. "You're looking pale and wan. Has your boy-friend dropped you?"

Paddy flushed a slow and painful scarlet, but before she could say either yes or no, Mrs. Frank added philosophically, "I wouldn't break my heart over him if I were you - nor over any man. None of them are worth it. If I had my time over again I wouldn't rush into marriage with Freddy. Yet at the time, he was my hero." She smiled wryly. "Hard to believe, isn't it? Did you meet anyone you liked better than yourself the other night, by the way? I thought it best to leave you to cope for yourself. I was sorry you didn't stay for supper, I'd have introduced you to some of the men."

"It didn't matter," said Paddy. "I just watched from a distance. I wasn't really dressed for a party, you know."

"Oh, you shouldn't worry about that," said Mrs. Frank cheerfully. "I'd have liked you to meet Venn Wildash, at least. He's our star turn. The country girls are all over him like a rash - he's really something. They say he's going to marry one of his wards - well, they're unofficial wards - but I don't believe it. The Duncan girls are too young and immature for a man like Venn Wildash - I've seen them at dances when they've been here for holidays."

Venn Wildash, thought Paddy, listening nervily with only the top of her mind. Keith had said something about Venn Wildash and his harem. She didn't regret not meeting him. In fact, right at this minute she felt too heartsick to work up any interest in him at all, however fascinating it was. Well, they say time heals all wounds, she reminded herself automatically, though she was not convinced.

"We'll have to see what we can do," Mrs. Frank was saying. "We might be able to work it somehow. You're a pretty girl and you've got brains too, who knows - he might take a fancy to you. It's worth a try!"

Paddy smiled palely, and as at that moment Freddy appeared at the dining-room door obviously the worse for wear, the conversation ended. He was told that his dinner was in the oven, and that if it wasn't exactly the way he liked it then it was his own fault. Paddy, who had eaten all she wanted, excused herself and disappeared to her room. It was no wonder Mrs. Frank was cynical about marriage, she reflected. "I would make a better job of it. Phil and I-" But it was futile to think of Phil now. And she couldn't yet bring

herself to sit down and write the sort of letter he wanted from her - forgiving, cheerful, understanding. He was the one who would have to wait this time...

She had still not written a few days later when she heard from Mrs. Kennedy. A warm friendly letter, urging her not to let Phil's engagement to Diana make any difference.

"This is still your home and your room is always ready for you. I know you had a bit of a crush on Phil, Paddy dear, but that was the natural reaction of a young girl left suddenly on her own. Phil doesn't realize it, but I know you must feel hurt. You just mustn't let it upset your life. Frankly, the way you two used to fool about together I always thought you were more like brother and sister, so casual and natural with each other. Love isn't usually as comfortable as that, and you'll understand what I mean when you really fall in love."

It was a letter full of affection and good advice, and Paddy's heart was wrenched. But all the same, Mrs. Kennedy was quite wrong. Paddy was in love with Phil, and she wasn't just hurt - her heart had been torn out! She could never go home for the holidays, she would sooner stay here, at Mrs. Frank's.

Doing what, she couldn't conceive.

But as the holidays came nearer, she discovered that she wasn't going to be able to stay with Mrs. Frank, who took it for granted that Paddy would be off to Sydney.

Mrs. Frank was shutting up the house and going to the coast.

"Freddy's coming along too," she told Paddy with a grimace. "You can't get rid of a husband as easily as that. I wish you could."

"A boy-friend's easily shed," thought Paddy bitterly. Or should it be a girlfriend? It's so easy to get rid of a girlfriend - especially when she's been sent off to Gidgeemallawa.

CHAPTER TWO

IT was Tuesday afternoon, a searingly hot, breathless day in December. School finished on Thursday, and Paddy, with no arrangements made for the vacation, was beginning to feel slightly panicky. The children from her class had all gone home, except for little Margaret Cale who was waiting for her mother to fetch her, and Paddy had not yet signed off.

She stood in the shade of the school verandah feeling limp and exhausted, and nearby Margaret sat on her minute school case waiting patiently. Paddy had been asked to afternoon tea twice at the Cales' bungalow, and she knew that Irene Cale was expecting another child. It must be trying in this heat, she supposed, yet the women out here bore their children the same as anywhere else, even the women on the outback stations, and those who lived on the

edge of the desert. "So what am I making such a fuss about?" Paddy wondered suddenly. It was rather weak-minded to be so completely thrown just because the man she was in love with had decided to marry someone else. He had never, after all, said a single word about marrying Paddy Dempster. .

Narrow-eyed, she stared thoughtfully across the dusty red street, still and empty under the glare of the sun, and as she stared, a car came round the corner and went quickly past the school and in a minute had disappeared. In those few seconds, Paddy felt her heart begin to pound. She had recognized the car. It was the station wagon that had brought her into town from the orange orchard. And that man had been driving it. It was absurd, but she had seen him with a peculiar clarity - just as she had seen him that night in the car when his eyes had looked into hers. Only this time he had not seen her. Yet if it had been someone she knew intimately - someone like Phil - she could not have perceived him more clearly. It was as if the storehouse of her mind had added to what her eyes had actually seen and built up a picture that was complete in every detail, and astonishingly real. Why should a complete stranger affect her this way?

She was still pondering this question when Irene Cale's car pulled up outside the school, and Paddy went outside with Margaret to speak to her.

"How are you, Mrs. Cale?" she asked sympathetically. "I wish I could have brought Margaret home and saved you the trouble, but it's a long walk in the heat for a little girl."

"Don't worry, Miss Dempster. I had to come out - I had shopping to do. But I'll admit I envy you going home to the coast for the holidays. I'll be off to Dubbo to wait for my baby," she added with a smiling grimace.

"I'm not sure that I am going to the coast," Paddy admitted, leaning down towards the car window now that Margaret had hopped inside beside her mother. "The - the people I'd have been staying with can't have me," she improvised, finding it a relief to confide even this much in someone. "I haven't made any real plans yet."

"Really?" The other woman's blue eyes were suddenly alert, interested. She was fair and plump, and Margaret, who had auburn hair and freckles, took after her father. "Well, you could be just the girl I'm looking for. The doctor wants me to go to Dubbo to wait for this baby I'm expecting - he's anticipating just a little bit of trouble, nothing serious - so Margaret's to go to her uncle and aunt at Bibbenluke. What bothers me is that Beth, my , sister-in-law, is a little - well, casual, shall we say? - with children." She looked at Paddy with a half smile. "Would it suit you to go along and just keep a friendly eye on Margaret?"

Paddy, whose pulses had leapt at this possible solution to her dilemma, had the sense to hesitate. "If I could know where Bibbenluke was, and-"

"You haven't heard of Bibbenluke?" Irene Cale appeared a little amused. "It's one of the big sheep stations out west. My brother Max Lewis is the overseer there."

Paddy's eyes widened with interest. "It sounds exciting. I think I'd like to go, especially if it will help you out."

"Then get into the car and we'll discuss it right away. If you stand in the sun much longer without a hat you'll get sunstroke and that will defeat the purpose. What do you think, Margaret?" she added, as Paddy did as she was requested. "Would you like Miss Dempster to go to Bibbenluke with you?" ;

Margaret nodded. She was a quiet, well-behaved child with a good intelligence. Paddy was fond of her and knew she returned the feeling. "Yes, I'd like that.. We could go for picnics. Simon's rather little still."

"Simon's getting older all the time," said her mother. She explained to Paddy, "Simon's Beth's and Max's little boy, four and a half years old. He arrived rather unexpectedly after they'd been married eight years or so. Beth is sweet, but while she was childless she developed an interest in sculpting, and that still absorbs a great deal of her time. So I worry, you see - because even the best behaved of children can wander a little further than they should - get lost - frighten everyone." She stopped, frowning. "Of course you wouldn't be tied down. It would be a holiday for you too. Do you want to make up your mind now, or would you like to think about it tonight?"

"I'll make up my mind now," Paddy decided. "I'd love to go, and thank you for giving me the opportunity."

"I'm an opportunist," said Mrs. Cale with a relieved smile. "But you will enjoy yourself - that is, if you're prepared to put up with the heat and isolation... Max will pick you up on Friday morning then, when he comes for Margaret. Right?"

"Great," said Paddy, smiling too. She thought she could stand the heat, and the isolation was not going to worry her at this time of her life. She wasn't in the mood for living it up. She would be quite happy picnicking with two small children, besides which she thought that Beth Lewis sounded quite an interesting person with her sculpture.

The following days flew by. Paddy wrote to Mrs. Kennedy saying she would not be home and explaining she had this super opportunity which she couldn't possibly pass up. Were Phil and Diana thinking of being married during the vacation? If so, she would have to miss the wedding, but she sent them her very best wishes. She hoped, as she finished the letter, that her hurt didn't show, and that Phil's mother would be convinced she was going to enjoy herself.

As perhaps she would. It would be a new experience, anyhow.

In no time at all it was Friday morning, and she was all packed up and waiting on the verandah for Margaret's uncle to come and collect her. There was nothing left to do but pull the front door shut. Mrs. Frank and Freddy

had left in the car for the coast a couple of hours ago, and had wished Paddy a happy holiday. A little disconcertingly, she had learned that the fabulous Venn Wildash himself was the owner of Bibbenluke station!

Mrs. Frank had said teasingly, "So you're to meet Venn Wildash after all, Paddy - and how! Maybe he'll take a fancy to you. Maybe you'll even put up a bit of competition for those two wards of his."

Paddy didn't think she would, and in any case she didn't want to. Venn Wildash was welcome to his harem, just as it was. She was not going to add to its numbers, that was for sure. She was thankful rather than otherwise that she would be staying in the overseer's cottage and not at the homestead.

She had written to Phil the night before. It had been a hard letter to write, and it needed an effort not to break into what would sound like reproaches and recriminations. Not to say, "How can you do this to me?" or to ask, "Didn't our kisses mean anything? Did you ever believe I thought of you as a brother?"...

She made several false starts, and finished up with something more or less satisfactory. "Dear Phil - I was surprised to hear about you and Diana. To tell the truth, I hadn't the least idea that you two were attracted to each other. I hope you'll both be very happy, but I'm afraid I shan't see you these holidays. I've been asked to spend the vacation at Bibbenluke, one of the big sheep stations out this way. It's rather funny you should have mentioned wealthy squatters. All the girls hereabouts are wild about the bass, so I must really

count myself lucky to have been invited along. Give my love to Diana. Yours, Paddy."

She had given Phil a completely false idea of the setup, of course, but that was deliberate. No mention of Margaret or of the fact that she wouldn't be staying at the homestead, had never even met the boss and quite possibly never would. Or that the boss was in the throes of getting himself engaged.

"The boss," she thought now, as she waited for Max Lewis to arrive. "Venn Wildash." For some reason, she hadn't been able to bring herself to write that name in her letter, and somehow even to think of it gave her a vaguely spooky feeling. She was aware of this feeling, but she couldn't analyse it, and it was only later that she was able to trace it to its possible source.

She didn't want to think about Venn Wildash just now anyhow. She thought instead about Bibbenlucke and about the Lewises, and she hoped she would be so busy helping with the children that she wouldn't have much time left to brood over Phil. By the end of six weeks, surely the bitterness in her heart would be tempered. And then it wouldn't matter whether she stayed on at Gidgeemallawa or not. She wasn't interested in a move back to Sydney now that she and Phil had broken up. Though according to Phil's attitude, there was nothing to be broken up. Did he really believe that? Or had Diana - who certainly knew better - somehow managed to convince him of it.

"And Diana was my friend," thought Paddy, her wound smarting anew. Was love like that? Cruel, selfish, careless of everyone else? "Don't think about it," she warned herself, and glanced at her watch. She was startled at the time. Surely she should have been picked up by now! Had something happened? Or had she been forgotten?

Time began to drag, and she grew anxious. It was almost lunch-time and she had all but given up hope when at last a car came into the street and pulled up at the gate. Paddy's heart suddenly beat a little faster. She jumped up from her chair, slammed the door shut, took up the one smallish suitcase which she hoped contained all she would need at Bibbenluke, and went out into the blaze of noonday sunlight. Margaret was waving from the car window, and on the far side, a man was climbing out. Paddy stared when he appeared round the bonnet of the car. Was that Margaret's uncle? That handsome, reckless-looking young man, with his air of having the run of the world? She bit her lip perplexedly, and an uneasy chord was struck somewhere in her mind. That mop of black curly hair. She gave herself a mental shake. She was imagining things. Of course it couldn't be Keith, the man who had grabbed her at the orange orchard and got her into so much trouble. And yet when he spoke, she knew she was right. She recognized his drawling, amused voice instantly.

"Hello! Are you Margaret's teacher?" He stood a few feet away, hands on hips, and looked across at her with eyes that were a greenish hazel. Paddy

was completely disconcerted. He was youngish - still in his twenties, anyhow - so he couldn't possibly be Margaret's Uncle Max who had waited eight years for a child now four. Simple arithmetic told Paddy that. So what was he doing here? She was disconcerted for another reason too. He was not at all as she had imagined her "attacker" to be. He just didn't look the type who would go around forcing his attentions on girls who were complete strangers. He even had a certain charm - though not of the type that appealed to Paddy - and right now those eyes of his were suggesting that finding her here was one of the nicest things that had happened to him. Maybe, thought Paddy, remembering her previous encounter with him, maybe he looked at any passably attractive girl in that same way, and it meant nothing at all - no matter what the girl thought.

Well, she, Paddy, apart from the fact that she was not looking for a flirtation, was forearmed by her knowledge of him, and that could be a good thing, particularly if it should happen she was to see much of him while she was at Bibbenluke.

Meanwhile she told him pleasantly, "Yes, I'm Margaret's teacher. I'm Paddy Dempster. And you're-" She stopped abruptly. She had been about to say, "You're Keith," but there was no point in bringing up that incident. She watched him quizzically. Was he going to remember? Would something click, now that he had heard her voice? For a second she thought it would, but she was wrong.

"I'm Keith Laidlawe," he said. "Beth Lewis's brother. And I swear if I'd known I was going to pick you up, I'd have hurried my bit of business through. When Irene said Margaret's teacher, I thought of - well, not anyone like you. You must have been waiting for hours.- I'm sorry about that."

"It's been quite a wait," agreed Paddy. "However, now you're here, shall we get moving?"

"Might as well. Here, give me your bag, Paddy." He put a hand protectively on her shoulder as he accompanied her to the car and opened the front door. She thought again, "He likes women. And he's persuasive."

"Here, Marg," he said, "You hop out and let your teacher sit in the middle."

Margaret looked questioningly at Paddy who told her casually, "Don't bother, Margaret. Stay where you are - unless you want to sit by the window."

"I can look out the front," said Margaret. "And Daddy says the middle's the best place for a little girl because of the legs being shorter. You must have the window, Miss Dempster, so you can see everything and tell the children all about it when it's school again."

"That would be an idea," agreed Paddy with a smile that was almost a grin. She gave Keith a little sideways glance and he raised his eyebrows ruefully.

"Now that's not kind. I'm hurt, Paddy Dempster."

"I don't think," thought Paddy to herself, though in a way she was already disarmed. He was plausible, and evenn rather likeable, and the other night he

had probably just had a little too much to drink. She asked as they took the long straight road out of the town, "What happened to Mr Lewis? I thought he was going to fetch Margaret and me this morning."

"Max? So he was. But he couldn't get away. There's been a bit of a stir out at Bibbenluke. Some wethers have been stolen or spirited away, and everyone's out investigating. Except for me." He sounded quite cheerful and unconcerned about it, and glancing over Margaret's head, Paddy saw that he was smiling to himself. "I persuaded the boss to let me come into town. He was all for sending Betsy - my sister - along, but she's rather wrapped up in a hunk of rock at the moment, besides which she's not all that keen on a long spell at the wheel. So I was noble and offered my services, and now here's proof positive that virtue doesn't go unrewarded." He turned his head to smile at her, and his hazel eyes lingered flatteringly on her face.

"And of course you had your business to transact," Paddy reminded him with mocking realism, and transferred her attention to the row of galahs perched along the telegraph wires.

"You're too clever by half, Miss Dempster," said Keith.

It was a long drive - far longer than Paddy had anticipated. They broke it to have a late picnic lunch in the shade of some coolibahs by a brown river, and when they went on, Keith organized games to entertain Margaret. Actually, they entertained Paddy too - watching for kangaroos or emus, and the various cockatoos and parrots that screeched and fluttered in the trees, or

swarmed across the sky. The further they went, the fewer big trees there were, but the plains were well grassed.

"It's been a good season," said Keith. "We've had fantastic rainfalls for out here. Water in the dams, green grass in all the paddocks, grasshoppers and 'roos and birds everywhere, and the sheep so scattered it's hell to muster them. All the smart farmers are buying up extra stock for fattening and making a packet of extra profit. It's the best season in years."

Both Margaret and Paddy were excited presently to see red kangaroos and their blue-grey mates feeding by the roadside, then breaking off to stand in an appealingly defenceless way, front paws held daintily in front, as they stared at the approaching car before bounding off across the paddocks.

"That's something you'll only see in a good season," said Keith. "They're after the green pick that's sprung up since the rains. They prefer the young stuff to the long grasses any day - if they can get it."

Paddy looked at him curiously. "You do know a lot. I thought you were new out here," she remarked, remembering he had said he hadn't been around here very long. As soon as she had said it, she wished the words back. There was no point in raking up old history.

"Hass someone been telling tales about me?" he asked frowningly. "I didn't know my fame had spread as far as the school house in Gidgeemallawa."

Paddy coloured a little and said with a shrug, "No one's been telling tales. I just somehow thought-"

"Then you thought wrong. I've worked in the outback ever since I left school, as a matter of fact. All over the west of New South Wales. I've moved about a bit, true enough, but I'm well on the way to settling down now - ask them out at Bibbenluke station... Where're you from, anyway? Are you English? Your voice is vaguely familiar - must remind me of some film star or other.!"

"I am English," Paddy admitted. "Though I'm beginning to think of myself as Australian. We came to Australia when I was seventeen.!"

"Oh? And where are Daddy and Mummy now?"

"My father died last year, and my stepmother went back to England."

"So you're all alone. No boy-friend?"

"I have all the friends I want," said Paddy after a second.

"Oh, come on now - aren't you and I going to be friends? What do you say, Margaret? Don't you think your teacher should be friends with me?"

"Everybody's friends at Bibbenluke," said Margaret, a little uncertainly.

Paddy pulled the child towards her. "Of course we'll all be friends. And I'm looking forward to seeing all the sheep, aren't you? But I guess it will have to wait till tomorrow - I'm planning on a very early night tonight."

"You hope," said Keith. "You'll have to report to the boss first. Everyone who comes to Bibbenluke checks in on arrival. I reckon you may have less trouble passing muster than I did, though. But don't let Venn appropriate you, will

you? You two little fillies belong with the overseer's mob, and don't forget it," he added with a laugh.

"Fillies are horses," said Margaret, cheering up. "Have you read The Silver Brumby, Miss Dempster? Mummy reads it to me at bedtime. I've brought my book with me, and my Hans Andersen fairytales too."

"I haven't read The Silver Brumby," said Paddy. "If you like, I'll read it to you at bedtime, Margaret."

"I haven't read it either," said Keith. "I might come along at bedtime and listen too."

"If you want to," said Margaret politely. "You mightn't like, it, though."

Presently Margaret fell asleep, and Paddy sat back quietly. She rather wished her holiday wasn't going to be complicated by the presence of Keith Laidlaw. She had an idea it might be difficult to be merely friends with him. She would just have to try to keep on good terms with him, while keeping him at a distance at the same time. It should not really be so difficult, since he would be working. She wondered if he had been serious when he said she would have to report to the boss. She wondered too why she should have this feeling of vague apprehension about meeting Venn Wildash. Surely she could put it off until tomorrow...

They had been driving through various sheep properties for some time, opening and closing gates, bumping over rough tracks, and seen nobody - but plenty of sheep in paddocks so vast that Paddy couldn't believe it. The

countryside out here looked good. It wasn't green by English standards, she was well aware, and it was very flat, but it wasn't in the least dusty and dried out. The dams were full of water and there were birds everywhere. grasshoppers whirred up from the ground and the birds swooped. Once a wedgetail eagle came soaring down, and high above in the cloudless sky, songlarks flew, and Paddy could hear the echo of their strange grating cry. A crowd of pink and grey galahs rose up from the grasses where they were feeding and as Paddy was watching entranced, Keith exclaimed,

"That'll be the boss's jeep coming round the black boxes. Must be still doing his detective work. I bet he hasn't traced those wethers just the same. It was a real professional job. A few wires cut, a truck in the dead of night - they're miles away by now."

The jeep came hurtling towards them, and Keith slowed down. Within a few feet of each other the two vehicles came to a standstill. Paddy was holding her breath. She thought with a strange nervousness, "The boss - Venn Wildash. So this is it!"

And the minute she saw him, she knew exactly why she felt the way she did about his very name. It had been a subconscious knowledge - an intuitive, though unadmitted, piecing together of various phrases and events.

Because of course, Venn Wildash was her "rescuer". The man with the so belittling opinion of her. The man with the harem. The man who was going to marry one of his wards.

Who might even take a fancy to her, Mrs. Frank had said. "And that was funny. There was no likelihood of that."

Keith didn't get out of the car. Paddy would have expected him to, but instead he unhurriedly took cigarettes from the pocket of his blue shirt and lit one. Paddy's nose wrinkled. She had tried one of those cigarettes and she hadn't liked it. She watched him draw on it, trying to persuade herself she was not in the least concerned about the man who had climbed from the jeep and was coming purposefully towards the car in which she and Keith and Margaret, who had now wakened, were sitting.

"I suppose I shan't pass muster," she thought instinctively. "I shall have to go."

He stopped on Keith's side of the car, leaned down and looked in at the window. He was intimidatingly handsome in a strong and very masculine way, and this afternoon in the hot, harsh sunlight, he had lost all his air of casual ease and sociability. Somewhere about him, there was a hint of violence. Paddy felt it, and tried to forget it. He wore a khaki shirt and cord trousers, and a wide brimmed stockman's hat was pulled forward over his deeply tanned face. Paddy watched him covertly, sitting well back in her seat as if by doing that she would somehow become invisible.

He leaned a tanned arm on the window next to Keith and said with a smile that showed square white teeth, "Hello there, Margaret! Looking

forward to a holiday with us? You must come out riding sometimes - I've picked out just the mount for you, He's called Starlight."

As he spoke, and while Paddy listened to his voice with a kind of shock of recognition that had the most curious and incomprehensible undertones, he shot a glance across the child that found its mark dead centre in Paddy's own eyes.

"Aquamarines," she thought, even while her heart froze.

Keith was blowing smoke, and at the back of her mind Paddy thought agitatedly, "He's either audacious or he has appalling manners." She looked away. The boss's gaze had intensified, and it was still on her - incredulous or angry, Paddy didn't know which. But he recognized her, that was for sure.

Keith drawled out, "What's the news about the sheep, Venn?"

Venn Wildash didn't even glance at him. "None," he said tersely. "I'll get a black tracker on the job. Roy, it will have to be." Then abruptly, to Paddy, "And what the hell do you think you're doing in this car heading for Bibbenluke?"

Paddy flinched. "I - I was asked to come-"

"By Keith?" His voice was like a whip.

"No! By Mrs. Cale. I'm Margaret's teacher." She saw blank disbelief in his eyes and went on coldly, "The Lewises are expecting me."

Venn Wildash tilted his straight dark brows and shook his head slowly. "No," he said simply, with the air of one who means, "you'll have to do better than that."

"But they are," contradicted Paddy.

Keith interrupted lazily. "The boss is right, Paddy - they're not."

"But they must be." Paddy was exasperated.

"What's your name?" The question was fired at her with steely precision.

"Paddy Dempster."

"Very well, Paddy Dempster, I'll see you tonight. When you've finished your dinner. Alone," he added.

Paddy's gaze had settled on her hands, clasped tightly together in her lap. What a ridiculous way to be treated! As if she were a lawbreaker of some time - or a gatecrasher. When she had a perfect right to be here - even if it was on this man's domain. She just couldn't believe that Irene Cale hadn't let the Lewises know she was coming...

She raised her head and faced Venn Wildash again, and this time she was the one who fired the question.

"Why?"

"Why?" His eyes blazed blue from the shadow of his hat. "Because you and I are going to have a talk, Miss Dempster."

And with that, the boss of Bibbenluke straightened up, turned and went back to his jeep, which catapulted off almost the moment he had climbed back into it.

There was silence for a second, then Margaret said in a small voice, "Mummy didn't tell Aunty Beth you were coming, Miss Dempster, because - because she thought her feelings might be hurt."

Paddy sighed inwardly. "Oh well, never mind, Margaret. It will be all right once we get to Bibbenluke," she said with a calm assurance she was far from feeling. She knew that her cheeks were bright red, and that she had never been more angrily indignant in her life. When Keith got the car going again, she couldn't stop herself from saying accusingly, "You didn't tell me I wasn't expected, Keith."

He shrugged carelessly. "I didn't know it mattered. How was I to know the boss would be so touchy? Frankly, I can't think what's made him so cranky - unless it's having his precious sheep pinched from under his nose."

Paddy said nothing. She knew what had made the boss cranky. He happened to have a very poor opinion of Paddy Dempster, and obviously thought she was here on Keith's account. Quite likely tonight he would tell her he preferred not to have her around. And if "Aunty Beth's" feeling were likely to be hurt by her presence, then she wouldn't have a champion there. So what was going to happen now? She thought with a sudden flare of irritation, "Why on earth did you have to act in such a stupid way that night, Keith

Laidlawe?" But then, she reminded herself tiredly, mightn't she just as well blame herself for the situation? She hadn't had any right to be at that party...

After a couple more gates had been opened and shut, they were on Bibbenluke land, and soon the station buildings came into view, spread out near a large permanent waterhole. Paddy looked about her with interest, and wondered if she would see much more than this of Bibbenluke station - by the time Venn Wildash had finished with her. There were two windmills, a big woolshed, and shearers' quarters - a machinery shed and the meathouse. Margaret pointed them out eagerly, with Keith's help. And there was the overseer's bungalow and a couple of hundred yards away, with the garages and the station store in between, the big homestead, half hidden in its garden.

"Cheer up, Paddy darling," said Keith off-handedly as he pulled up. "Betsy won't eat you - she'll give you a great big welcome, I promise."

Paddy didn't believe it, and she listened rather gloomily when, having preceded her up the steps and deposited the two suitcases, of which Margaret's was the larger, on the verandah, he shouted through the open door, "Surprise, Betsy! I've brought you two visitors instead of one."

His sister appeared immediately - a small dark-haired woman with friendly brown eyes. She wore blue jeans and a shirt that looked like a man's, with the sleeves rolled up and the neck open. She stooped to kiss Margaret and tell her, "Simon's in the sand pit around the back, love - run out if you

want to." Then she put out a welcoming hand to Paddy and gave her a quickly appraising glance. "Hello! You're a friend of Keith's?"

"Since I loaded her into the car a few hours ago," said Keith, and at her look of reproach, amused though it was, he added, "I didn't abduct her, Betsy. This is Paddy Dempster, Margaret's schoolteacher, believe it or not. Paddy - my sister Beth. Poor Irene was scared she'd hurt your feelings, Bets, if she let you know she was sending her along to watch over her darling child... Anyhow, I'll leave you two to sort it out between you while I put the car away."

"Come inside, Paddy," said Beth hospitably, as he disappeared. "I'm afraid I haven't a room ready for you, but it won't take a sec to make up the bed... Is it right what Keith says?" she continued as Paddy followed her into the house. "About Irene, I mean. Or is Keith pulling my leg and he's invited you along?"

"It's true," admitted Paddy. "I was sure Mrs. Cale would have let you know. Is it all right for me to stay? I mean - if you don't want me," she added doubtfully.

"Of course you must stay," said Beth at once. "You can tell me all about it later. Would you like to freshen up? I'll get Vera to make a pot of tea and we'll get acquainted over that, shall we?"

She went away and Paddy freshened up in the bathroom nearby, then combed her black hair at the dressingtable mirror in the small bedroom with its off-white walls and polished wood floor. The curtains and bedspread were

green and white cotton, and it all looked fresh and pretty. Someone had brought her suitcase inside while she had been in the bathroom.

"Want to hang anything out?" asked Beth from the doorway.

"It can wait," said Paddy, who thought that maybe it would be wiser to wait till after her interview with the boss!

Over tea on the verandah, she explained to Beth what had happened, tactfully putting it that Mrs. Cale had felt Margaret would mean extra work when Beth was involved with her sculpting. "Of course, if you don't need me, I shan't stay," she concluded. She said nothing about encountering the boss, and being told to report to him that night after dinner. She had practically made up her mind she wasn't going to obey that order, anyhow. Her being here had nothing to do with Venn Wildash anyhow.

"Most certainly you'll stay," said Beth. "Irene's developed nerves along with her pregnancy, I expect. Margaret's never any trouble - if you're her teacher you'll know what an absolute little pet she is. Simon adores her. But you're most welcome to stay and have a proper holiday. Keith will look after you. Do you ride?"

"A little," admitted Paddy, rather put out that her help was so obviously not needed. She didn't want to stay here simply to be "looked after" by Keith. That was not her idea at all, and she knew what Venn Wildash would think of it. But she was not going to start pouring out confidences about her disastrous encounter with the boss, or about her knowledge of Keith and his techniques...

She said frankly, "I can't possibly stay if I'm not going to be any help, Mrs. Lewis—"

"Oh, call me Beth, do. And don't worry. You can help all you like. I let the children entertain themselves most of the time, but they adore picnics, and you can take them to the river - fuss over them all you like if it will keep you happy."

"I want to be useful," said Paddy emphatically.

Beth looked at her for a minute. "I think you'll be useful," she said slowly and thoughtfully. Then after another pause, "Particularly when I have one of my migraines."

The children appeared then, Margaret with sandy hands, Simon, a fair-haired stolid-looking little boy, with a sandy face as well.

"Can I show Margaret where she has to sleep?" he asked his mother in a slow emphatic voice. "And she's going to let me see her toys, too."

"I only have my dolls and their clothes," said Margaret. "But I'll show them to you, Simon, and I've got two story books. Miss Dempster's going to read to me when I go to bed."

"Will you read to me too?" asked Simon. He was an unsmiling child, very matter-of-fact and direct..

Paddy told him cheerfully, "Yes, if you like."

"I've got a book about a fire engine. Do you want to see it?"

"Later, Simon," said Beth. "Take Margaret along to her room, and then you must both go to the bathroom and wash your hands and faces. Vera will have your tea ready soon."

"I'll show you my book later," said Simon agreeably to Paddy, and he and Margaret disappeared into the house.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Paddy went to her bedroom a little later, the bed had been made up and clean towels hung over the back of a chair. Keith had not reappeared, and Paddy decided to take a shower and rest before dinner, which would be served when Max came in, Beth had said.

"Everything's a bit upside down today because some sheep have been stolen and the men are trying to discover if it's a local or an outside job," she had said. "Keith really should have stayed and lent a hand and let me drive down to Gidgee."

Paddy took her shower and came back to the bedroom in her cotton dressing-gown to stand towelling her hair dry. Long windows opened from her room on to the wide verandah which was shaded by the big green leaves of a

passion-fruit vine. Late afternoon sunlight filtered over the garden, and she could smell the cedar flowers. Their scent was as evocative as that of the orange blossom, but far more subtle.. Paddy thought of Phil, but could not picture him here. It was a land that belonged to men like Venn Wildash and Keith Laidlawe, and in the sullen gold of the hot sunlight she could see the colour of Venn Wildash's hair with a clarity that was exasperating.

She gave a start when there was a knock at the door, and called an automatic, "Come in," thinking it would be Beth, or the aboriginal maid Vera, or even Margaret with little Simon in tow.

Instead it was Keith who stepped in and closed the door behind him as casually as if he had every right to be there.

He leaned against the door and looked at her while he took out a cigarette. "I came to tell you dinner'll be ready in half an hour. I wanted to save Vera's poor old legs."

Paddy raised her eyebrows. "I wish you hadn't bothered. And I'm sorry, but I don't like your brand of cigarettes."

Keith, who had just lit his cigarette, paused and looked at her hard. He pinched the lighted end between an apparently unfeeling finger and thumb and said thoughtnllly, "So that's where I've heard your voice before, and lhat's why I detected a bit of coolness. Well, I guess I owe you an apology. I got just a little bit tight at that party. And the boss-" he snapped his fingers - "I had a feeling this afternoon the boss knew something about you. He probably

thought he'd crashed in on a heavy love scene that night. He doesn't believe in Women's Lib except for the girls he reserves for himself... What happened after I left you in the dark and at his mercy?"

"Nothing," said Paddy, colouring.

Keith narrowed his eyes. "He warned you against me. What did he say?"

"He didn't warn me against you. It would have been a bit late, in any case, wouldn't it?" She looked at him coolly, unencouragingly, and he made a rueful face. "Now if you don't mind - I want to get dressed."

"All right. But before I go - don't hold it against me, will you, Paddy? I repeat, I'm sorry about grabbing you the way I did. It wasn't as if you were just anyone, you know. Even if I'd been on the grog, I liked your voice and I knew you'd be pretty - and intelligent. So will you forget your prejudice, and let's start anew?"

"All right," said Paddy. She thought she would let him discover for himself that they were not going to "start" at all.

"With a kiss?"

"No," said Paddy, but she smiled as she said it. She didn't want to make a thing of it and create a situation. After all, she might be around for six weeks... She turned her back on him and moved towards the wardrobe - where she had still not hung her clothes. After a moment he said, "I'll see you later, then," and the door shut behind him.

Paddy breathed again. So that was that. He would soon catch on that she wasn't hungry for a flirtation. Like a dull blow at her heart the thought of Phil returned, and she felt the familiar sickening pain of disbelief and helplessness. A darkness, a silence, where she had been used to finding communication and light and happiness. Keith no longer mattered. Nor was she desperately interested in what happened after dinner...

She stayed in her room till Beth came to fetch her. She had shed a few tears, because she was tired and because everything seemed confused and uncertain, as well as because of Phil. She had put on a dress of off-white cotton. It had a low-necked bodice that fastened with a row of tiny buttons, and no sleeves. It could be glammed up with a bright belt and gay scarf or beads, but tonight to match her mood she wore a narrow silver belt and an enamelled medallion on a fine silver chain. She didn't quite know if she should dress up for dinner or not, but clothes didn't matter all that much to Paddy, and she decided she had made a pretty satisfactory compromise. At the back of her mind somewhere, there was also the thought that if she should have to report to Venn Wildash later on, then she didn't want to look like a fly-by-night.

Simon, she thought, some minutes later, would grow up to be exactly like his father. Max Lewis had the same rather stolid shortish figure, and his hair and moustache were a sun-faded blond. He had blue eyes that were kind and sympathetic as well as being searching, and Paddy liked him instantly.

He was a comfortingly fatherly sort of man, even if he wasn't much over forty. He asked after his sister, told Paddy that she was a very welcome addition to the family, and that he was sure she'd have lots of opportunities for getting around the property and enjoying herself - though she noticed that he didn't suggest that Keith should show her around.

Conversation at dinner was largely concerned with the stolen sheep, and with the wild horses Venn had rounded up from the scrub to break in and sell.

Keith persistently returned to the sheep.

"The boss says he's going to get a black tracker in."

"Is that a fact?" It was news to Max, and apparently a little surprising. "You'd better ride round the western boundary tomorrow, Keith, and check on the fences."

Paddy listened while she ate with enjoyment the dinner served up by Beth, with the help of the aboriginal girl, Vera, who quite certainly didn't have the old legs Keith had referred to. But soon she discovered she had ceased to listen and was conducting an inner debate with herself. Would she or would she not go over to Bibbenluke homestead when dinner was over?

"Why should I?" she thought, but such reluctance seemed immature and evasive. What was there so intimidating in the thought of being closeted alone with Venn Wildash and those aquamarine eyes of his? It was strange how the image of those eyes remained etched on her retina even while she was sitting here in the dining-room with its soft flattering lighting. The very

memory of Venn Wildash's eyes made her uneasy. But not in a guilty schoolgirlish way. It was something that went deeper than that, far deeper, and she remembered that incomprehensible moment in the car when he had driven her back to town. Incomprehensible then, even more so now. Something had happened or almost happened, but she had forgotten exactly what - if she had ever known. There had been a feeling of being on the point of glimpsing - or knowing - something. It had been a very intense sensation at the time, and now it irritated her that she could not completely recall it.

"I'll play it by ear," she decided, as she ate her dessert - home-made ice-cream and fruit salad. She hoped Keith would say nothing, and to her relief he seemed to be far more interested in station affairs, in the sheep and the black tracker, than in anything else.

When dinner was over she went with Beth to the front verandah to sit in the dark and look out across the garden at the paddocks and the bright stars that hung above. Keith had excused himself to go and work on the car engine. "It's been playing up all day. I'm going to fix it if it takes me all night."

Paddy heard him say this with some surprise but made no comment. The motor had seemed to be behaving perfectly during the long drive out from Gidgeemallawa. But perhaps there were noises that only an experienced ear would be aware of. Or perhaps Keith had reasons of his own for disappearing.

Max, who had gone to the kitchen to fetch some beer, asked when he came back, "Where's Keith?" Beth explained and he gave a grunt. "I checked

over that motor the other day. Must be all right. What the hell can he be up to?"

"Oh, nothing," said Beth a little crossly.. "You and Venn want to watch his every move. It's absurd."

"Have it your own way," said Max, with an apologetic half-smile at Paddy. And he settled down with his glass of beer.

It was no more than five minutes later that footsteps sounded on the gravel path. Paddy's heart began to thump guiltily. Was it Venn Wildash, coming to fetch her personally?

But it was not the boss. It was the jackeroo, Johnny Heath.

"Venn sent me across to fetch Paddy Dempster."

Paddy stood up resignedly. So she had to go. Well, it was nothing to get worked up about. "Think about it sensibly," she told herself. "What's it all about? You came to Bibbeniuke in good faith to help keep an eye on a little girl. The boss thinks you're promiscuous and he doesn't like you. So who cares? You're not going to take any notice of his cockeyed beliefs. Stick up for yourself and it will all come right." But of course, there was more to it than that.

Johnny Heath was a lanky young man, laconic and casual and not what you would call sociable. He said, "How you going, Paddy? Aw-right?" when Beth introduced them. He lit a cigarette, barely looked at her, and led the way through the garden.

"Like it here?" he asked half-way across the wide gravel square in front of the garages. Paddy noticed that a light shone from one, and presumed that Keith must be inside tinkering with the car engine.

"I can't say yet," said Paddy. "I've only just got here."

"Be bored to death after a week, probably. Suits me, though."

Paddy was a little amused, mainly because she wanted to have her mind distracted from the interview ahead.

"Are you from the bush?" she asked.

"Too right. I'm a real bushwhacker. My old man has a place on the Darling. When I go home I'll be able to teach him to suck eggs." He grinned down at her in the starlight. They had reached the homestead garden and Paddy went through the gate ahead of him, stepping under cedar trees where the air was heavy with the musky scent of their flowers. Beyond was a lawn with a spreading tree in the middle of it, and under the tree two girls sprawled on the grass, barely visible in the distant light from the house. Paddy saw their heads turn in her direction and she thought with a quickening of her heart, "Venn Wildash's harem. His unofficial wards. He's going to marry one of them, Mrs. Frank had said." She wondered if the jackeroo would introduce her to them, but he didn't. He led her along a side path and up some steps to the verandah, and as the wire door swung shut, Venn Wildash appeared from inside the house.

"Thanks, Johnny. Come along with me, Paddy."

Paddy followed him silently. It was not till she was in the small room that was his office and the door was shut behind her that she really looked at him. The light was set in the ceiling and it seemed too bright, and though the windows were wide open the room was very warm.

"Sit down," said Venn Wildash. His sea-blue eyes looked hard at her and something surfaced in her mind. She wanted to stare back into those eyes, she wanted to repeat what had happened so disconcertingly in the car - to find out- It was the magnetism of those eyes that compelled her : .

He looked somewhat as he had the first time they met, except tonight he was without a tie, and though his shirt was white, his pants were a pale straw colour. And his hair, straight, untameable, warmly blond, fell carelessly across a square forehead. Paddy sat down in a chair that stood a little to one side of the desk. She crossed her legs at the ankle, and he stood in front of her, leaning on the desk with one hand and looking down at her, his lashes glinting dark gold under the uncompromising electric light. He looked at her feet in their pretty chalk blue sandals, at her neatly crossed though bare ankles. His glance travelled up her legs, slender, slightly tanned; lingered on her knees, continued to her throat and the enamelled medallion. Then to her face and - Click! their eyes met and he frowned imperceptibly. Paddy felt the minute but increasing quickening of her heartbeats. She had never met a man who affected her physically like this before, and she discovered she was nervously clenching and unclenching her fists.

He said, relenting to the extent that he now looked at a scratch on the back of a long-fingered masculine hand, Well, who worked it, Miss Dempster? You or Keith? Or was it a joint effort?" His eyebrows rose. "And what's happened to that man of yours in Sydney? It would seem your affections are as fluid as quicksilver... Or are you going to tell me you've come to turn over the' pages? I don't believe Keith plays the piano, anyhow."

He stopped and looked a question at her, and Paddy grimaced. "What do you want me to say? I'm sorry, but I don't seem able to deal with such a mouthful of - of insinuations all at once, and besides, I can't see that anything you've said has any relevance. I came to Bibbenluke to help Beth look after Margaret, that's all."

He smiled now, but it was not a friendly smile. "You find yourself some quaint excuses, don't you, with positively nothing to hold them up," he added flatly, "Keith was damned well determined to be the one to go into Gidgeemallawa today to fetch Margaret. I wondered why. And now I know."

Paddy put her chin up. "What do you know?" she asked, nettled. "I find your reasoning hard to follow."

"Do you? Quite frankly, I find your stories hard to swallow. I suppose I must accept the fact that you're Margaret's teacher, though certainly teachers have changed since I was in school. As for helping Beth - Margaret's a sensible well-behaved little girl, and I'm afraid I just don't believe that Irene Cale sent you along."

Paddy coloured angrily. "I'm not in the habit of lying!"

"You're not? Well, all I know about your moral habits is what I've seen for myself." He paused and Paddy's imagination filled in the blank bitterly - hanging around in the shadows, gatecrashing, fighting off men in the dark - so why not settle for lying too?

"You don't like me, do you?" she said. "You've made that very clear. I don't like you either, and if I wanted, I could give you three good reasons - more." Her eyes were held by his and now she could see very plainly the dangerous glint behind their sea-blue dazzle. "If I were a man," she thought, her nerves tingling, "he'd knock me down for speaking to him like this."

"Don't bother," he rapped out. "I'm not interested."

"That's great," said Paddy. "Because I'm not interested either. In fact, I don't know what I'm doing here talking to you. I don't owe you any explanations for what I do. Still," she went on hurriedly, not liking the anger she saw behind his blue stare, "Mrs. Cale asked me to keep an eye on Margaret, and Beth says she'll be particularly glad of my help when she has migraine. I shall be keeping well out of your way, I assure you."

She stopped and hostility flared like a fierce white light between them. She felt in her bones that now he would seize hold of her and give her a good shaking, and her body tensed and her nerves began to jump, and two red spots of colour burned in her cheeks. She saw the whitening of his knuckles where he gripped the edge of the desk, and then he said with maddening

calm, making her feel she had spoken hysterically, "So Beth suffers from migraine, does she? That's the first I've heard of it, and I've known her a good many years now. Still, as an excuse, it's better than turning over pages... How did you pick up with Keith again, by the way? Or are you possibly one of the girls from his star-scattered past?"

"I picked up with him this morning in Gidgeemallawa - according to Mrs. Cale's arrangements," said Paddy icily.

He tapped one foot and she saw that it was shod in a beautiful shoe of soft light tan leather.

"It looks like you've got all the answers, doesn't it?"

"You certainly have all the questions," she retorted. And suddenly, fleetingly, they both smiled slightly.

"You - like Keith?"

"He's a likeable person." Her tone implied that Venn Wildash was not, and her eyes dared him to contradict, which he did not. He merely drawled, "In your considered opinion. So I was rescuing you from no more than a - stimulating wrestling match the other night. I seem to recollect you called him a drunk on that occasion. As you've come back for more, I take it that was merely some kind of tactical move to assert your moral integrity."

"Do you?" Paddy was seething and her voice shook a little, but she swore, No more hysterics. She would play it calm and cool from now on. He looked at her in silence for a long minute, and then he said deliberately, "At your age,

a girl doesn't put in six or seven weeks in the bush for the sole purpose of unnecessarily looking after someone else's child. Particularly when she has a man of her own waiting for her in Sydney where all the fun is. I can only conclude that the potent brew of passion that Keith hands out must appeal to you pretty strongly." Paddy flinched but didn't move. "I think you'd better come along, to Gidgeemallawa with me in a few days' time when I go in to meett my nephew," he continued. "I'll put you on the train for Sydney."

As though she were a load of goods - a bale of wool! "I wish you would mind your own business," she told him sharply.

"I'm doing exactly that, Miss Dempster. I have several problems on my hands right now and I don't need any more - particularly ones that are tied up with Keith Laidlawe." He narrowed his eyes fractionally. "As a matter of fact, it might teach you a lesson to let you stay, but your moral education is not my business - and you're possibly a tougher type than you look. You're certainly a pretty girl - almost a beauty." He looked at her fully and his glance settled on her breast, round about where the medallion hung on its silver chain. "A careless beauty, however - you've got your buttons mixed up." With an easy movement, he leaned towards her, and his hand reached towards her bodice. Paddy coloured furiously, and with a tingling shock her fingers intercepted his as they touched the row of tiny buttons.

"I thought pretty girls were vain. Didn't you look in the mirror before you came to impress the boss with your good intentions?"

Paddy stood up. "I don't have to impress you. You're not my boss. And you can forget about putting me on the train for Sydney."

"I make the decisions on Bibbenluke," he said flatly. He crossed the room and held the door open for her. "Can you find your way back without getting into trouble?"

"I'll try," said Paddy frigidly. Head high, she marched across the verandah, went down the steps and along the path that passed the lawn where those two girls still sprawled. Her mind was a whirlpool of confused thoughts and feelings. Uppermost was the thought that she disliked Venn Wildash intensely and she was pleased she had more or less told him so. He was so intent on misconstruing every least little thing she did or said. And it is decidedly unpleasant to be painted black when that is not your colour at all. Paddy almost wanted to pack up her gear and disappear overnight and never see him again. But that was impossible, and besides, she had come here for the summer vacation and here she would stay if it killed her...

When she reached the overseer's bungalow, she was thankful to find that no one was sitting out on the verandah. The garages had been in darkness as she passed them and Keith was not in evidence. She went straight to her room and got ready for bed, suddenly aware that she was dead tired and long past thinking coherently. She couldn't even weep inwardly over Phil tonight.

She fell quickly into a dreamless sleep, and wakened briefly at some unearthly hour to hear the short sharp bark of a dog and the creaking of the

verandah boards under stealthy footsteps. "Keith," she thought with surprising clarity. And then she slept again.

She woke refreshed to a day that was well under way. Her upset of the previous night had abated, and her mind felt free and clear. The men would have gone off to work long ago, and ahead of her stretched a peaceful day with Beth and the children. Everything was going to be fine and just as she had imagined it.

Or so she thought.

It was already hot, so she showered, and pulled on a sleeveless cotton top and old jeans that were thin and comfortable; slipped her feet into rope-soled sandals and found her way round the verandah in the direction of the kitchen. In the shade of some trees across the lawn, she saw the two children playing happily with sand, gravel, and buckets of water.

"G'day," said a soft pleasant voice, and she turned to find Vera standing in the kitchen doorway, a smile on her broad brown face. "You sleep well, Paddy? You want egg an' some chops for you bekfus? Tea an' toast's nearly ready too."

That was a friendly start to the day! In a very few minutes she had been installed at a table on the verandah with an enormous breakfast and a huge pot of tea all to herself. And she was hungry! At the other end of the table, Beth Lewis sat, smoking and staring through narrowed eyes at a chunk of granite that lay on a bench under some acacias.

"I've got to make something of that," said Beth, after they had exchanged greetings and Paddy had made a start on her breakfast. "I've been contemplating it for over a week now, and I've just managed to get myself past the stage of seeing nothing but a hopelessly awkward lump of rock. Right now, I'm having thoughts of a sow and some piglets, or maybe - well, I'm still in the throes." She glanced with raised eyebrows at Paddy who was eating her way steadily through two eggs, two chops, and the mound of toast provided by Vera. "Are you going to eat all of that? You don't have to, you know. You mustn't let Vera bully you into it."

"I'm ravenous," said Paddy.

"Healthy sign. You look as though you need a bit of country air and country fare - though it's hard to connect such a pretty delicate-looking girl with that solid a meal... Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

Did she enjoy herself-! Paddy almost choked on a mouthful of tea.

Beth ground out her cigarette and lit another. "Sorry, I shouldn't expect you to talk while you're eating. I suppose you met the Duncan girls and Agnes, anyhow. Venn's very hospitable, isn't he?"

Paddy had now bitten into a slice of toast, so no answer was required. She merely smiled with her eyes.

"Did you like the girls?" Beth pursued presently. And this time there was no excuse for not answering.

"I didn't actually meet them," Paddy confessed cautiously. "They were sitting out on the lawn in the school."

Beth gave her a sharp little look. "You met Agnes?"

Paddy looked blank. She hadn't the least idea who Agnes was.

"Venn's aunt - Miss Wildash. She does the housekeeping at the homestead. You surely met her."

Paddy sighed. Something had to be said. "I didn't meet anyone. It wasn't a social call," she said apologetically. "It seems Mr. Wildash can't see what I'm doing here. As a matter of fact, he wants to take me in to Gidgeemallawa and put me on the train for Sydney when he goes in to pick up his nephew."

Beth stared at her. "Oh, we can't have that! Has something upset you? Do you want to leave?" she asked suspiciously.

Paddy shook her head. Certainly she had been upset last night, but she wasn't going to pour out the whole silly story into Beth's ears. "Still, I suppose I have foisted myself on you," she admitted. "That's how he - the boss - sees it."

"Rubbish," said Beth briskly. "I'm delighted to have you here. Of course if you regret coming - and it's not to everyone's taste - if you've somewhere better to go-" She looked a question.

"I haven't," said Paddy definitely. "The people I board with in Gidgeemallawa have gone away."

"Not Gidgee. I meant in Sydney. Have you anyone there?"

"Not now. My. stepmother went back to England after my father died last year."

"So you're all alone. Then stay here and enjoy yourself and blow Venn. He can think again. I don't know why he wants to interfere. He's not usually so hard to get on with. I'll have a word with him, anyhow. And of course you must meet the Duncan girls. They've been more or less part of Bibbenluke on and off for, a long time now. Could be one of them will soon become a permanent fixture, who knows?" She frowned faintly, and her eyes strayed again to that piece of granite. "Even a human mother and child," she said after a moment. "Though that's not really my thing. And I can't imagine where I'd put it." She smiled at Paddy suddenly. "You must think I'm mad. But I get so much enjoyment from chipping away at a block of stone - creating something - even though as a sculptress I'm far from being a worldbeater."

"I'd love to see some of your work," Paddy said, dragging her mind away from an annoying preoccupation with that remark of Beth's about the Duncan girls. It seemed rather odd that if Venn Wildash were thinking of taking a wife there could be doubt as to which of two sisters he was in love, with. And what sort of girls must they be to put up with such a situation? Now if Phil had been vacillating between me and Diana, she thought automatically - and suddenly shut her mind off and listened to Beth again.

"My very best effort is over in the homestead garden. Pop over and take a look if you're interested. It's by a little pool near the left end of the front

verandah. You can introduce yourself to Agnes and the girls while you're there."

"What about the children?"

"Oh, they're all right. Vera's here and so am I. You run along."

Well, why not? Paddy wanted to see Beth's stone carving, and also she was definitely curious to meet the Duncan girls. Venn would be away from the homestead, so it was an ideal opportunity. She pushed back her chair as Vera padded barefoot across the verandah in the direction of the back steps. She had a large bottle in her hand, and she told Beth, "I'm going down along the kennels, Beth, see that Trixie. Keith say she's a sick dog - wouldn't take her work the sheep today. Maybe she need a dose of medicine, maybe jest sleep."

Paddy went inside. For some reason she remembered that dog she had heard barking last night, forgotten till now. Had that been Trixie? And had Keith taken her out with him while he worked on the car engine?

A few minutes later she was on her way across the garden. She stopped under the trees to talk to Simon and Margaret who were completely absorbed in a mysterious game that involved trucks, loaded with gravel, and other stones that represented people. As she stooped, hands on her thighs, she noticed a split in the right knee of her jeans. "Bother," she thought. "When did that happen? My favourite old jeans!" She watched the children for a while longer, then set off for the homestead. It wasn't far to walk, certainly, but the sun was burningly hot - much hotter than in town - and a' hot wind was

blowing, and she knew she should have worn a hat, as she always did in Gidgeemallawa. Well, it was time she got a suntan, and lost that delicate look Beth had referred to:

She opened the gate into the homestead garden with a feeling strangely like guilt, as if she were trespassing. Or gatecrashing, she thought, smiling wryly to herself. She moved through the trees and the sweet scent that hung on the air towards the lawn. She almost expected to see the girls under the big tree, but though there were chairs and a lounge, they were deserted. The homestead, in the sunlight, looked old and mellow with its vine-draped verandah, slender wooden pillars, and low sheltering roof. A simple building, most pleasing to the eye in its setting of trees and garden. Everything around was hot and still and quiet.

The front left-hand corner, Paddy thought. But she was watching the house nervily.. Maybe if Venn's aunt saw her she would rush out like a witch and chase her away. "Shoo ! You're not wanted here. One of the Duncan Girls is going to be a permanent fixture at Bibbenluke soon. Go away!"

It was like a silly dream the way the thoughts went through her mind, and when she put a hand to the top of her head, it was burning hot.

She reached the narrow strip of shade by the verandah and there was the small pool, a simple oval shape with a low dripping fountain. At one side, green stuff crowded round and at the other a stone dragon guarded the water. No, not a dragon - one of those lizards that belong in the outback. A

bob-tailed lizard. Mouth opened wide, tongue showing fearsomely, eyes dark and polished like jet. Its short rounded tail was curved neatly around the edge of the pool that looked as though it had been built especially to accommodate it. It was cleverly sculptured, and the faint marbling of the rock, as well as its subtle texturing, suggested scales.

Paddy stood admiring it for some considerable time, half hypnotized by the soft plop-plopping of the water, a sound that was now intensified, and now receded, as her attention concentrated or wandered away. Perhaps there were others of Beth's sculptures here. But first she must go to the house to make her presence known. That was the right thing to do. Not to be found hanging around in the shadows...

The front of the house seemed so deserted that she decided to go around to the back. Agnes Wildash and the girls might be gardening.

She reached the end of the path that ran by the side of the house and stopped short. Two girls had come into her range of vision and she stared at them.

The Duncan girls! Venn Wildash's harem! Applicants for the position of Mrs. Venn Wildash.

Two girls with straight fair hair that reached almost to their shoulders. Pretty, round-faced, slightly goofy-looking girls. One was just a little goofier than the other - and a little sexier too, Paddy decided. And they both looked very young indeed. But what on earth were they doing? Paddy stood at the

very corner of the house near a clump of oleanders and watched them. They wore long flared skirts - one blue and green, the other red and orange. And they wore fitted cotton tops with tucks and crocheted trimmings. Now they were dashing forward, almost straight towards Paddy, though they certainly hadn't seen her - into the blazing sunshine, cramming identical cotton hats on to their heads and calling out - something - to - someone.

A man in sunglasses stepped into Paddy's sight from around the corner, so close that Paddy could almost have touched him, and she heard her own small involuntary gasp. It was Venn Wildash, and of course, they were calling out to him to take their photograph. They stood, eyes wide and alight, staring expectantly, lips just parted - the goofier, red and orange girl's lips just a little more parted than the other one's, her eyes just a little wider. And as Paddy was about to turn and go quickly, stealthily away, Venn Wildash moved his head and sent her an indolent stare from behind his sunglasses, almost as if he had known all the time she was there. The girls looked her way for a flickering instant too, and then back at Venn and the camera.

Venn turned back, casually removed his glasses, steadied the camera, and took one shot. The girls struck a different pose - one smiled, the other was serious - and he shot that too.

Paddy watched and waited, half curious, half annoyed. She might have been a tree, or a cat, or something, for all the notice they took of her. Any of them. And the girls certainly looked as if they were out to fascinate the boss,

and Paddy didn't think they were having all that much trouble doing it either. Now they bounded forward, snatched up long chiffon scarves from the grass, flung them round their necks - produced cigarettes which they held, unlit, with a flourish - tossed back from their faces the shining blonde hair that the hot wind was tormenting - turned their backs and paced off. Venn watched them, and so did Paddy, who thought they were so practised they must surely be models - a deduction that later proved to be right. Now they swung round suddenly, arms slung across each other's shoulders, and came towards Venn with long graceful strides. Another photograph, and another, and then they pounced on Venn and carried off the camera.

And Venn replaced his sunglasses and moved a step closer to Paddy with a cool inquiring look on his face as though she were a passer-by wanting to know the way, or to sell him a ticket in the Art Union.

"Were you looking for me?" he asked politely.

Because his eyes were hidden behind the dark lenses, she found her gaze riveted on his mouth, and she could see just an edge of square white teeth. She shifted her glance quickly, to the tobacco brown silk scarf at his throat, to his forearms, bare and brown and covered with fine hairs that shone gold in the sun. Shirt and trousers were of pale milk coffee colour, and in all he had the air of a man of leisure enjoying a holiday.

Paddy said blandly, "No; I'm not looking for you. I thought you'd be at work."

"Well, as you can see - I'm not at work. So-?" Straight dark eyebrows appeared over the top of the sunglasses.

"He thinks I'm snooping around," thought Paddy angrily. She was suddenly conscious, too, of her far from impeccable get-up. She was in no condition to be posing for photographs... Meanwhile, the two beautiful girls stood in the shade removing the roll of film from their camera. Venn took off his sunglasses and she was unexpectedly exposed to those blue eyes, and she flinched slightly. Her mouth was open now, and if anyone had ever looked really goofy, she was sure it was Paddy Dempster. She couldn't think of a thing to say.

He looked her up and down very quickly and said smoothly, "You have quite a talent for tearing your clothes, don't you, Miss Dempster? How did it happen this time?"

Had she ever blushed before? Certainly not in comparison with the wave of scarlet that now engulfed her face. And what had happened to her cool? Before she could find a word to say, the Duncan girls had joined the party, and their round toffee-coloured eyes stared frankly at Paddy. They were so alike, she thought they must be twins, though the red and orange one had a kind of febrile air about her. It was she who looked the hardest at Paddy, taking in her dark hair, the perspiration on her forehead and upper lip, the rent in her jeans; and finally smiling. There was something disconcerting in the way she smiled, and Paddy felt uncomfortably and with slight resentment

that it had a lot to do with what her eyes had discovered in their appraisal. She thought instinctively, "She's the one who wants to be a fixture here'...

To her more than slight surprise the boss of Bibbenluke introduced her exactly as though he had never said an angry or a hateful word to her. "Girls, this is Paddy . Dempster. Paddy - Jeanne and Annette Duncan."

"Hi," said Jeanne and Annette together. Paddy hadn't the least idea which one was which. She swallowed, managed a bright smile, and a brief "Hello!"

"You've torn your jeans," said the febrile one sympathetically. Or was she drawing special attention to that little fact? "Want the loan of a pair?"

"No, thanks, it's not bothering me," said Paddy carelessly. "I was just - snooping around," she added, choosing the word deliberately and sending Venn Wildash a lightning-quick glance, "in the hope of discovering some of Beth's sculptures."

"Have you seen the lizard? That's the best."

"Yes, I found that one."

"There's a little foal under the wilgas-"

"Flat out and fast asleep."

"Too flat out - everyone thinks it's just a rock-"

"Do you want to see?"

The blue and green one started to move off. The other, the febrile one, lingered and looked at Venn. "Are you coming - Venn?" The way she said

Venn was like a caress, surprisingly intimate and sexy in one who looked so young.

There was an odd expression on Venn's face that Paddy couldn't read. She had an uneasy feeling that he had been watching her while those girls talked.

"No, I'm not coming, honey."

Honey! thought Paddy.

"You're waiting around for that black tracker! He's not going to turn up - he's gone walkabout."

"He'd better turn up," said Venn. Quite abruptly he walked away. His back said, You're on your own...

The foal was certainly a disappointment. Not one of Beth's successes, as she confirmed herself later on. The surface of the stone was crumbling as though the rock were too soft to stand up to the weather.

"There are two big pots by the gate into the horse paddock," the girls told her after she had studied the foal. "It's a bit of a walk. Do you want to see? Beth did them ages ago - one summer when we were here for the school holidays."

"Two years after our mother and granddad died."

"It's too hot," said Paddy, who was feeling the sun even worse now and wishing very much that she had not forgotten her hat. "I'll see them another day. Perhaps," she added.

"Okay."

They all began to walk back towards the house.

"How long are you staying over at Beth's?"

"Oh, for a while, I think," said Paddy, carefully noncommittal.

"Would you like to come swimming to the billabong tomorrow? It's Sunday-"

"That would be great." Paddy looked at the other girl - the febrile one.
"Are you twins?"

"No. I'm Annette. I'm eighteen and a half."

"I'm Jeanne. I'm nearly twenty."

"You're a friend of Keith's, aren't you?" said Annette.

They were standing in the full sunlight, yet suddenly everything began to look a little dark to Paddy. She tried to say, "Not really," but the words didn't emerge. She shook her head and it began to spin, and then Jeanne and Annette both seemed to be talking together in strangely echoing voices, and Paddy hadn't the least idea what they were saying. It was all a busy, humming, muddled jumble, and she was walking - or drifting - into a sizzling hot fog. In fact - at any minute now she was going to pass out...

They helped her on to the verandah, but after that she knew nothing until a tall woman with dark greying hair looped back from her face in an old-fashioned way was stooping over her and saying, "Too much sun on the top of her head, that's all. Silly girl, why doesn't she wear a hat? You should have

lent her one, Jeanne, the two of you've got more hats than you know what to do with in the wardrobe inside."

"We did offer her pants," said a voice meekly. "She's torn her jeans. But we just didn't think of hats. I'm sorry, Aunt Agnes."

"And so you should be! You've no more sense than a couple of grasshoppers-"

Paddy struggled up into a sitting position. "I'm quite all right now, please don't worry-"

"No breakfast either, I suppose," said Agnes Wildash disapprovingly.

"I had a huge breakfast."

"Coffee and orange juice," stated Agnes firmly, as if she knew best and would not be told. "Jeanne, there's fresh lemonade in the fridge, bring'a big glass. Annette, fetch some cushions from the sitting-room."

A flurry of obedient footsteps and the two goofy beauties had run off like schoolgirls to do Aunt Agnes's bidding. Was Venn Wildash really going to marry one of them? Paddy found it hard to believe. At the same time, she was wondering, "Aren't I to be asked inside? Cushions on the verandah for Paddy Dempster." But that was being kinky, they just didn't want to move her yet.

"I'm Paddy Dempster," she said, looking up at the tall straight-backed woman who stood beside the cane lounge where she was reclining. "I'm staying with the Lewises."

"My nephew told me about you." She was aloof and impersonal, and Paddy grimaced inwardly. What had Venn told his aunt about her?

"I'm Margaret's teacher," she said determinedly. "Mrs. Cale asked me to keep an eye on her."

Miss Agnes Wildash smiled ironically. "Indeed? I'm sure you won't find it a very exacting task."

Paddy felt the colour return to her face in a flood. Another disbeliever!

Simultaneously, Annette returned with two fat cushions and Jeanne with a tall glass brimming with icecold home-made lemonade. Paddy allowed herself to be propped up and took the glass with thanks. While she drank thirstily, Agnes told Annette, "Go and have a rest now, child. You've been running around all morning and Venn's gone now - he's driven off with Roy."

"I don't need a rest," protested Annette, petulantly.

"I think you do. It doesn't do to be careless too soon after you've been concussed."

"Then I'm going to look at Vogue."

"All right. But lie on your bed while you do it. Jeanne, go out to the kitchen and tell Millie I want the oven ready for scones."

Paddy finished her lemonade and set the glass down on the floor. No one was taking any notice of her at all. It was not a comfortable feeling, and it was Aunt Agnes who was responsible - because of what Venn had told her about Paddy. Obviously, she doted on the Duncan girls, who were quite

ridiculously obedient. They might protest a little, but they did as they were told, and now they were vanishing into the house again.

At the door, Jeanne turned back. "Don't forget, Paddy - the billabong tomorrow. We'll call for you."

"I'll be ready." Paddy felt cheered. Her spirits rose for exactly two seconds. Because then Agnes said distantly, "I am going into the kitchen now, Paddy. Stay just where you are until you're feeling quite better, and then go quietly back to the cottage. I shall tell Millie to bring you a hat."

She stooped and picked up the glass from the floor, gave Paddy a headmistressy look, and then said, "Goodbye."

And she means good-bye," thought Paddy, chilled. "I'm not exactly welcome here!"

CHAPTER FOUR

That night at dinner, the talk was of the stolen stock again, and Beth wanted to know what discoveries the black tracker had made.

Max shrugged. "Oh, Roy says the sheep were taken away in a truck. Nothing new at all. I suppose he's right. I can't imagine any of our neighbours

shifting them across the boundary. But Venn's disappointed not to have had the bone pointed at anyone in particular. I don't know just what he was expecting. He seems to think he might have done better with Nim, but he's gone with the police over to the Began."

"What's wrong with Roy?" Beth demanded.

"He's still too tied up with abo culture. There are things he won't have anything to do with - totem areas he won't go on and so on. So what can you do?"

"It's all a gamble, I suppose," said Beth a little uneasily. Paddy thought she was looking pale.

"Fattening those sheep for sale shouldn't have been a gamble," Max said dryly. "In a season like this there should have been nothing but sure profit in it. Well, someone'll get the profit, but it won't be Venn. He'll put another mob on the pasture, I daresay. The stock and station agent from Gidgee will be out at Belah Springs Monday or Tuesday, the boss will probably drive over and see him. Can't waste a lush season altogether." He turned to Keith, who hadn't taken part in the conversation. "How's Trixie tonight?"

"Okay," said Keith. "Vera dosed her up with something, and she's lively as a boxful of snakes."

Paddy felt a bit out of it all, particularly so as earlier on, when she had gone out to the verandah where the children slept to read to Margaret, she had found Max there already telling them a story. Of course it was Max's

privilege to tell stories to his son, but it did rather point up the fact that she wasn't needed here. True enough, she had played Animal Grab with Margaret for a while in the heat of the afternoon while Simon was having a sleep, but pretty soon Margaret had begun to droop too, and had finally staggered off to her bed.

So it looked as though, unless she resigned herself to being no more than an uninvited guest, she might as well leave. Maybe Venn would designate the task of removing her to the stock and station agent and make it all the easier!

Dinner over, they all went on to the cool of the front verandah, and soon Keith, who had been pacing up and down restlessly, suggested that Paddy might like to come for a walk in the garden. She would have made some excuse, but Beth said enthusiastically, "Yes, do that, Paddy. It's a good time for a little gentle exercise. Max and I shall take a turn too presently."

Paddy sighed inwardly. Perhaps Beth and her husband wanted to be alone... Reluctantly she got up. She hadn't walked in the dark with any man since she had left Sydney, and she didn't relish strolling about with Keith Laidlaw. She was a little afraid too that a flood of memories would surge into her mind, and the best way to get over a love affair was supposed to be to cut out anything that reminded you of the past.

As it happened, the half-expected nostalgia never even got off the ground, perhaps because Keith's company kept Paddy constantly on her guard.

He took her arm as if they had known each other for years and asked as they strolled along the path, "Well, what super exciting things did you get up to today, Paddy love?"

Paddy ignored the endearment. It was just too practised and it certainly didn't mean anything. She searched her mind for an answer, because of course she hadn't done anything super exciting at all.

"I met the Duncan girls," she told Keith finally. "They're sweet."

"As honey," he agreed. "Though a bit puerile for Venn Wildash, one would think. At his age, he should have different tastes."

Paddy raised her eyebrows in the dark. "Is it true lie's going to marry one of them?"

"Why not?" Keith pulled a leaf from a gum tree that grew where the front garden ended and, the back garden began, and crumpled it between his fingers so that Paddy's nostrils were tickled by the aromatic eucalyptus scent. "Why else would he want to take them away from their urban playground and put them to graze on the Bibbenluke pasturage?"

Paddy listened, faintly puzzled. She wasn't sure whether to be amused or not. Keith had spoken flippantly, and yet there was a strong undertone of malice in the way he spoke. For sure he doesn't like Venn Wildash either, she decided, but she still found she couldn't side with him.

They walked on a few paces and then almost against her will she pursued, "Annette's the younger one - the one who had concussion, isn't she? What happened? Was she in an accident?"

"She had a fall from a horse soon after they got here."

Keith continued the tale: 'Agnes had them a good halfway to the altar - her nephew and her dream- child. Haven't you noticed how she dotes on that girl? Now - for the time being at any rate - it's off. All still in the air. They're both young and fair like Peggy - just his dish, as Agnes is always remarking, or words to that effect. Maybe he favours Jeanne now. She probably has a few more brains than Annette, though she's certainly not as attractive."

Paddy didn't want to hear any more. She felt sickened. She pulled sharply free of Keith's arm and of the hand that had begun to caress her hip, and moved ahead quickly. "I'm going in. I had an overdose of the sun this morning," she tossed back at him, and she walked at a furious pace through the orchard. Nothing about Venn Wildash, she thought, would really surprise her. Nothing. She would put absolutely nothing past him. Even this. Trampling on the feelings and emotions of the girls he was supposed to love, playing games with the lives of girls still in their teens. He was an autocratic, heartless, hateful man, and she disliked him more intensely than ever, and she didn't really want to know a thing about him.. For Annette, she felt sorry. That was all.

As for Keith, he shouldn't have told her any of this and she wished he hadn't. As an employee on Bibbenluke, surely he should learn to be discreet. The best thing she could do was to forget what he had said - completely.

A well-intentioned resolution but not, she was to discover, one that it was easy to keep.

Keith had caught up with her by now and had seized hold of her wrist and pulled her back.

"Come on now, don't turn all school mistressy on me. Don't act like I'm something in bad taste, Miss Dempster. Do you have to be updated? It's natural for pretty girls to want to find out and for handsome men like Venn Wildash to be willing to teach them. You shouldn't be upset Venn's not behaving like Sir Galahad."

"I'm not upset at all," said Paddy tightly and not in the least truthfully. "And you don't need to update me. But I don't believe a word you've said, and I'm just not impressed by that sort of gossip. Especially about the man you're working for and - and guests on the property. Otherwise, I couldn't care less about Wildash."

"Just as well for you, Paddy love," said Keith, his fingers still tight on her wrist. "He liked his girls blonde. Though that's not to say he won't make the odd pass at you. But remember, I'm the one who like brunettes with big grey eyes. So we'll forget about the boss and if you don't want to hear the station gossip I'll shut up. Now can we kiss and make up'?"

Kiss and make up! "For heaven's sake," said Paddy between her teeth. "Just let go of me - at once. If you don't, I'll scream louder than you've ever heard anyone scream before!"

"You are a case!" He sounded wounded, but he let her go just the same. "Why don't you learn to relax - to act naturally and not take life so seriously? Has some guy upset you in some way? Forget about him! Kissing can be therapeutic - just what you need. Bring a rope along with you next time we come out for a walk in the garden. You can tie my hands behind my back if that will make you feel safer."

Paddy supposed he was trying to be amusing, but she was not amused. All she wanted now was to get away from him, to be by herself. To forget everything she had heard. Everything.

She wondered when she reached the safety and solitude of her room why she should feel so inordinately upset. What did the sordid details of Venn Wildash's life matter to her? Or was it of Annette she was thinking? Annette, who looked so young. And that feverish look she had noted , was that - desperation?

Forget it, Paddy, she told herself. Forget it.

When she went swimming to the billabong with Jeanne and Annette the following afternoon, she was quite certain that Keith had been talking nonsense. The Duncans were nice enough girls, maybe a little puerile, a little wrapped up in clothes, but basically nice. She was sure. They walked to the

pool and it took a good fifteen minutes because it was too hot to do more than saunter. They trailed along the river's edge by a narrow path through grass grown high in the extraordinary rains, and now slightly yellowing, flipping the flies away with their towels and scarcely talking at all. It was too hot even for that. The cicadas were too noisy, anyhow, and every few minutes the summer air was filled with their deafening orchestration.

Max had taken the children out riding, and Keith was helping Beth reposition her hunk of rock the way she wanted it, even though she knew he had wanted to come swimming too. Paddy was a little impressed by Beth's self-will. She was determined to start on her sculpture before the sun went down, so Keith must stay.

That meant there were only the Duncan girls and Paddy, who didn't ask where Venn was, she was so thankful when he didn't come along. But when they reached the swimming spot, there was a little old car parked in the shade of the collibahs and Agnes Wildash sat in it, crocheting. Paddy called out, determinedly polite, "Hello, Miss Wildash.. Isn't this a lovely spot?"

Her only answer was an unsmiling nod, and Agnes returned to her crochet. "You'd think I was a bad lot," thought Paddy frustratedly, as she began to unbutton her dress. She wished suddenly that everything could slip back into the happy past again - say six months ago, when she was still in Sydney and Phil was in love with her - or she had believed he was.

Another forbidden road for her thoughts to have taken.

She felt Agnes Wildash watching her as she stripped off her blue and white spotted dress, revealing the plain navy one-piece swimsuit. Jeanne and Annette wore bikinis that showed off every bit of their figures, and soon the three of them were in the water. It was a lovely stretch of water, almost tepid in the hot sun, overhung by willows, while tall gums and coolibahs grew beyond. Jeanne and Annette knew all the deep spots, and they knew from which branches it was safe and permissible to dive, and the time passed pleasantly.

Later, they sat on the grassy bank taking a breather while Agnes kept her eagle eye upon them from the car. Paddy, hugging her knees, remarked, "You know Bibbenluke well, don't you? Didn't you say you came here for holidays years ago?" She was fishing and she felt vaguely ashamed of herself, but surely it was a harmless question.

Annette looked at her in surprise. "We practically belong to Bibbenluke - and Venn. Didn't you know?"

"Our granddad - our mother's father - was overseer here for years and years," put in Jeanne. "Till he and our mother -"

"And Peggy," said Annette, who was staring vacantly into the water.

"Yes, and Peggy - were killed in a plane crash."

"Right here on the property," said Annette, looking up, her eyes round and blank. "So Venn looked after us -"

"And sent us to boarding school. Because our father' - Jeanne made a wry face - "well, we don't remember him much, because he more or less walked out on Mother."

"Shot off," said Annette. "He's in Canada now, he's married again or something."

"He wasn't a good provider," Jeanne said. "That's what Aunt Agnes always says. He was jackeroo here and that's how he and our mother met. But he didn't like the bush much, and they got married and went to Sydney and that's where we were born."

"I love it here," said Annette dreamily. "And Venn is so fabulous. I've always adored him. And I always will." She sat up and slipped back into the water as she made her last remark, and swam slowly away. Jeanne followed her and Paddy stood up thoughtfully and looked for a place to dive from.

"Paddy!"

It was Aunt Agnes, and Paddy, who had more or less made up her mind to being ignored, was distinctly surprised. She picked her way across the grass to the car.

"Yes, Miss Wildash? Did you want me?"

"For just one moment, dear."

Dear! Good lord, what's happened to the cold shoulder? Paddy wondered.

"I should like you to come to dinner at the homestead one night. Tuesday, I think."

Paddy blinked disbelievingly. "Thank you. I'll see if I can arrange it with Beth."

"That shouldn't be difficult. Come a little early - shall we say half five - and we'll have a talk together."

Paddy nodded and grimaced inwardly. Was there something ominous in mention of a talk? Had the wolf eaten butter to make her voice sound soft to the little goats? And what was Venn going to say when he found Paddy Dempster at his dinner table? Well, we shall see what happens, she thought when she was dismissed.

Aunt Agnes drove away not much later, and within a quarter of an hour Keith arrived, and the whole character of the afternoon changed. Keith, as the sole male, became the focal point, and he was practised enough to persuade each girl to believe she was the one he admired most. It was perfectly obvious to Paddy, but not, it appeared, to the other two. Annette was the one who got the biggest kick out of his flattery and it was she who let herself get caught when he chased her along the bank. They fell into the water, the slender girl in her bikini lashed to his half-naked body by his brown arms. They surfaced and Annette screamed laughingly to Jeanne for help, and soon the three of them were thrashing about together and making a great deal of noise.

Paddy, who had been swimming about by herself, climbed out of the water feeling disillusioned. Keith was just so ready to give any pretty girl he

met a thrill she felt embarrassed to see Annette responding so easily. How could she seriously adore Venn and act so stupidly - with such a lack of dignity - with Keith? For the first time Paddy wondered if there was a little of the minx in Annette's make-up.

She turned her back on them and walked slowly up the grassy bank and wrapped her big green towel around herself, and shook back her short black hair. Deliberately she closed her ears to the sound of the squeals and shouts that came from the billabong pool, and stood quite still, wondering if, now that it was getting towards sundown, the air wasn't just fractionally cooler. Or was it that her blood had been cooled by the water?

Suddenly, for no reason at all, she knew that she was not alone on the bank. She turned her head just slightly. Venn Wildash stood under a red gum watching her through half closed eyes. She felt a strange shiver go through her. "My enemy," she thought involuntarily, and following the thought a ripple of excitement cut through to the very core of her being. As if she were about to leap straight into dangerous physical combat.

She stayed exactly where she was, not wanting him to know how acutely she was aware of him - how oddly affected. Though he knew she had seen him. She wondered what he was thinking and how long he had been there. Why he should be watching her rather than those three in the water. There was something - smouldering about him. Not just his eyes, but the set of his

mouth and the way he stood, so completely still, his arms folded across his chest. For just now, anything Keith had said was irrelevant.

He is thinking, she surmised, What is this hussy doing on my property - swimming in my waters, lazing by my billabong, sunning herself in my sunshine under the blue dome of my sky. Staying put on Bibbenluke. Accepting invitations to dine at my table... It was as though she were actually reading his thoughts, and she could feel his fingers itching to take hold of her and hustle her off. She could almost sense the very touch of his hands, warm against the water-cold of her bare skin...

She moved abruptly to break the spell, and took the few yards that brought her within comfortable conversational distance of him.

"I've been swimming in your pool, Mr Wildash."

"So you have." His expression was vaguely quizzical, but there was the quick crease of a frown between those extraordinarily level and almost black eyebrows.

"Lounging on your grass," said Paddy. "Listening to your maddening cicadas. Brushing away your damnable flies." She stopped, then added abruptly, "When do we go? Or am I to be told on Tuesday night?"

His frown deepened. "On Tuesday night? I'm not following you, I'm afraid."

She coloured faintly. So he wasn't behind that invitation. "Your aunt asked me to dinner on Tuesday. I thought you might let me know then when you'll be going to Gidgeemallawa." She kept her eyes on him as though compelled.

In the late sunlight, his hair shone a light golden brown that verged on being red-blond. It contrasted fantastically with those dark eyebrows, and, obviously newly washed, it fell across his brow so softly and silky that she knew an almost irresistible impulse to reach out and touch it. In that instant, she admitted what she hadn't quite admitted before: there was something about him - physically - that attracted her powerfully. But she wasn't like Annette. She wasn't a blonde. And all he wanted of her was that she should get off his property. She was no more to Venn Wildash than some kind of annoying insect - a gnat or a mosquito, or a fly.

His eyebrows tilted now, he moved, and stretching out his right arm he placed his hand flat against the smooth mottled trunk of the gum tree.

"So you want to leave us now, do you - you've had enough? Of what, I wonder?" His eyes strayed momentarily to the three in the water who were still fooling about, and his eyebrows came together in a frown.

"I don't want to go. You want me to," said Paddy.

He said nothing for a moment. Then - "Yes, I want you to go. I wish you'd never come. And if you stay long, I think you'll wish that too. I'm aware that you've already painted a pathetic picture of yourself to Beth - the orphan of the storm, the homeless waif with nowhere to go. I gather you omitted to mention your Sydney boyfriend. However, I shall have no compunction in booting you off the property if need be."

Paddy felt the angry colour surge into her cheeks. He certainly did regard her as a tramp! She had known it and yet she hated him anew for it. There was not one single thing about him that she liked - apart from his handsome face and body. Oh, how she would like to let him know exactly that! To thump his chest with her fists - to say "I hate you - I hate you-"

As if in accord with her mood, the cicadas in the trees around plunged suddenly into a deafening drumming that slaughtered the heat mercilessly. The air throbbed and rang until it seemed part of the furious pounding of her own blood. It was strange, the effect that maddening sound could have on the human body, strange that insects could create such a penetrating din. Paddy had felt it overpower her before, in the playground at Gidgeemallawa. It reached such a pitch of intensity you thought it would send you completely crazy - when the whole world seemed nothing but vibrating, devastating sound. And then suddenly you collapsed inwardly, you gave in, you let it become part of your very bloodstream... And this evening on the river bank, while Paddy stared at Venn with hate and fury, she felt her body taken over by that sound. Played upon, possessed. Submitting. Strangely, her rage drained away. She was submerged, vanquished. She stared mindlessly into the aquamarine eyes of Venn Wildash who was in some way inextricably tied up with the maddening song of the cicadas.

Paddy didn't know if it was happening to Venn too. But something passed between them. Each of them stood motionless, the air vibrating insanely

around them, and then suddenly, as if at some unheard signal, the mad orchestra stopped. A silence fell on the stricken air and Paddy felt so exhausted she could have dropped to the ground. Instead, she went shakily to lean her back against the tree upon whose trunk Venn still had his hand.

Neither of them spoke. He had turned his head slightly and his jewel eyes watched her as she lay exhaustedly against the support of the tree. She felt herself shiver, and knew instinctively that she should avoid this man.

Her lips moved. "Okay. Boot me off the property if you must," she heard herself say, as if no time at all had elapsed since he had spoken. "I've said all I have to say."

He looked at her curiously for a long moment, and then abruptly he moved away from the tree and strode down to the water's edge. Paddy watched him. What had happened to her? Something had happened, she knew. Something had developed between them - between her and this infuriating man. But what?

He had reached the pool and he had said something to the three in the water. Paddy didn't hear what it was, but the splashing and the foolery ceased. Keith hauled himself out of the water, picked up his towel, and strolled towards his car. The girls, their heads bobbing, looked up at Venn - as if they would do anything he said, Paddy thought with a curiously intense pang. Then Annette scrambled out on to the bank and stood shaking her hair back, her almost naked body gleaming and wet.

Paddy turned away suddenly. She called out, "Wait for me, Keith!" and she too snatched up her clothes and was running after him with no more than a casually shouted good-bye to anyone who might be bothered to listen.

Paddy was now torn between the determination to stay on at Bibbenluke and the desire to get away, quite specifically, from Venn Wildash. Her angry hatred of him was no longer a simple and uncomplicated emotion, for she had become disturbingly aware that there was some sort of contact between the two of them at a deep subconscious level. It had probably begun long ago, that night in his car when their eyes had met for a mad fleeting moment. And at the billabong it had been there again, dangerous, incomprehensible. Most likely, she told herself cynically, it was pure animal magnetism. Nevertheless, it was both obsessive and infuriating. She had imagined she would be using all her ingenuity to stop herself from thinking of Phil, from brooding over her broken love affair, and instead it seemed she was continually having to pull herself up over thinking about Venn Wildash...

Beth said it was "sweet" of Agnes to invite her dinner.

"She's a tiny bit possessive, rather wary of outsiders. And she's a real mother manquee, she fusses over those Duncan girls like an old hen. She adores them so completely it's just not true. She's at the back of all this business about Venn and Annette," she added musingly. "Of course he must marry, but one would really think he could find someone more suitable than either of those two girls, charming though they are."

Paddy made no comment. She had the feeling that Beth was not really talking to her, but was thinking - or worrying - aloud. It was mid-afternoon and the children were amusing themselves with paints on the verandah while Beth and Paddy had a cup of tea, and Beth stared out periodically at her slab of stone in a bemused way. She had started to chip at it, but she had come to a full stop and admitted she was undecided what she was going to do.

Now she lit one of her inevitable cigarettes and narrowed her eyes, and Paddy half expected that when she spoke again it would be about her projected sculpture. Instead she said musingly, "But my God, I hope he won't do something he'll live to regret. It's true enough those girls are like Peggy in a superficial way - blonde and young and pretty. But Peggy wouldn't be like that if she were alive now." She stopped for a moment, and Paddy thought frustratedly, "Who on earth is Peggy?" but she wouldn't have asked for the world. It was as though by asking she might betray something that was not merely curiosity. "What Venn needs," said Beth, ashing her cigarette, "is someone mature, yet still young enough to bear his children. Though God forbid I should start nominating candidates!" She looked at Paddy with a small grimace. "The complications of life on an isolated sheep station! I worry, you know, when Keith starts hunting the boss's quarry. He needs a wife too, heaven knows, but chasing after those girls won't do him any good at all. Besides which, I can't imagine either one of them settling him down."

She laughed suddenly. "If I don't watch out, I'll be dragging you into it all. I'd be wiser to stick to my sculpture, wouldn't I? But what woman can help meddling just a little bit? Just as well it's all double Dutch to you... Never mind, Paddy, you just go on looking decorative and enjoying your holiday."

Decorative, reflected Paddy, but not blonde. Not like Peggy, whoever Peggy was. Some girl Venn had been in love with - a girl who had been killed? It was aggravating to feel so frustratedly ignorant about Venn Wildash's life, when she didn't want to concern herself about him at all. As for Keith, she certainly hoped that Beth wasn't going to have any ideas about Paddy Dempster providing a steady influence on his life...

For dinner at Bibbenluke homestead, she dressed carefully in a pale jade green dress with a deep neck and sparkling flame-coloured buttons - all of them carefully done up - and flame-coloured shoes to match. It was her smartest outfit, bought with Phil in mind, of course, and it looked good with her black hair and lightly tanned skin. Of course she wouldn't look a patch on Jeanne and Annette, both of whom had loads of clothes - whether because they worked as models in Sydney or because Agnes Wildash doted on them, Paddy didn't know.

It was silly to be keyed up about going to dinner next door, but Paddy was keyed up. She wanted, yet she didn't want, to see Venn again, and she wondered if anything more would be said about going to Gidgeemallawa. She hadn't mentioned Venn's plans to Beth since her first day, and she wasn't

sure, if it came to a showdown, who would win, Beth or the boss. She rather suspected it would be the boss.

Venn wasn't about when she reached the homestead and neither were the girls. Agnes told her they had driven over to Belah Springs to see the stock and station agent about buying some more wethers for fattening. Venn's aunt, in blue silk and a cameo brooch, offered Paddy a choice of Vermouth or dry sherry when they had settled at one end of the wide verandah that was furnished like a small open-sided sitting-room, with low table, comfortable chairs and carpet. On the table were bottles, glasses, a silver jug of ice and a dish of tiny cheese biscuits that Agnes had made herself. They both drank sherry, and Paddy very soon discovered what Venn's aunt wanted to talk to her about.

"You may think I am interfering in affairs that don't concern me, Paddy, but I want to advise you against having anything to do with Keith Laidlawe. I am very fond of Beth, but her brother I do not like."

Paddy, who had just taken a bite on one of the delicious little biscuits, wanted to say that the advice was unnecessary, but before she could speak, Agnes Wildash continued.

"Like many a nice girl - and I think you are a nice girl, I watched you at the billabong - you no doubt think the best of people and believe whatever pretty things Keith chooses to tell you."

"Not really," said Paddy mildly, and reflecting that Keith hadn't told her many things that could be called pretty. "You mustn't worry about me, Miss Wildash. I can look after myself."

"Please let me finish... Of course I am not prophesying that you will come to any real harm, though it can happen all too easily even to the nicest of girls, believe me. But the wisest thing for you to do would be to go away and forget Keith."

Paddy raised her eyebrows a little. So Agnes wanted her to go away too - and she was being very diplomatic about telling her so. She said casually, "Oh, Keith's not bothering me, I assure you. He's all right."

Miss Wildash pursed her lips. "I'm afraid he is by no means all right. My nephew has only employed him here out of a feeling of indebtedness to Max and Beth Lewis, who helped him through a very difficult period of his life, and I for one regret that he was ever so mistakenly kind. Keith is not worthy of help and he is a danger to any nice girl - to my girls as well as to you, unfortunately. In fact, he is what I would call unadulteratedly bad." She paused and gave Paddy a very headmistressy look.

Paddy didn't bother protesting again. She took another biscuit and reflected that Miss Wildash was rather overdoing it. Keith was probably something of a womanizer, but could you call him unadulteratedly bad? Wasn't that a trifle melodramatic? At any rate, she wasn't in any danger from him, though she couldn't speak for the other two girls...

"And so," Agnes Wildash said, "I repeat that you must go away and forget Keith Laidlawe. My nephew will be driving to Gidgeemallawa at the end of the week, and you must ask him to take you with him."

Well, that, Paddy reflected, smiling slightly, would hardly be necessary, and she nodded solemnly.

Miss Wildash's blue eyes watched her shrewdly. "Much as I should like to, I don't feel it would be diplomatic - or convenient - to ask you to stay here with us just now. It is in a way a rather special time, now that the girls have come home to Bibbenluke. You may be able to guess what I mean when I tell you that Annette has made a very special place in Venn's affections ever since she was a child, and now she is quite grown up," she concluded, favouring Paddy with a very piercing look that was not altogether friendly.

Paddy sighed inwardly. In other words, "Keep your eyes off Venn," she thought, and despite herself she blushed deeply and embarrassingly - and was relieved that exactly then, the screen door banged and Jeanne and Annette, fair hair flying, came along the verandah followed by Venn.

Her colour faded rapidly, but she felt a clamminess on the palms of her hands and she knew an awful compulsion to meet Venn's eyes - to discover what was going on behind them. But when he greeted her - coolly - and she met his glance, she found it hostile and had the annihilating feeling that he was wishing her out of his life. Not just off his property, but out of his life.

He was polite and non-committal to her at dinner. Very non-committal. In fact, it seemed to Paddy that he ignored her as much as good manners would allow, though now and again she had the feeling he was watching her. It would have been a, good thing, she told herself, perversely, if she could have listened to Agnes Wildash's advice and then gone back 'home'. So she needn't have seen him. Needn't have sat at the gleaming oval table where the lamplight brought a softness to those disconcerting aquamarine eyes of his as he sat surrounded by his harem. Johnny Heath was not present - it appeared that he often chose to eat with the other few men employed on Bibbenluke station.

They took coffee in the sitting-room, one wall of which consisted of folding glass doors that opened on to the verandah so that it was pleasantly cool. A ceiling fan whirled and there was the minimum of lighting so as not to attract the few moths that had found their way inside through the insect screen. As Paddy drank her coffee, her eye was caught by the studio portrait of a girl, that stood on a cedarwood cabinet. A pretty blonde girl, her hair caught in a bunch at either side of her round young face, smiling a little, lips parted, head tilted provocatively.

Peggy, her instincts told her, and she felt an almost uncontrollable desire to know exactly who Peggy was. Annette was a little preoccupied with that photograph too. Paddy observed her small action when, having been told by Agnes to fetch more coffee for Venn, she moved it to a slightly different

position as she passed by. Why? Paddy wondered. So that she could see it better from where she sat on the floor near Venn's chair?

The others were talking about Belah Springs and Venn's dealings with the stock and station agent. Paddy listened idly, but inwardly she was watching to see if Venn treated Annette any differently from Jeanne. For the life of her, she couldn't see any particular tenderness in his attitude, or even in the way he looked at her. He's heartless, she decided, and the thought fed her animosity.

Annette brought Venn his coffee and dropped gracefully on to the floor at his feet, sitting so that her pretty figure was shown up by the tight bodice of the dress she was wearing. Was she a minx? Or was she simply a girl in love?

Paddy was jerked out of the half reverie into which she had fallen when Agnes said abruptly, "Venn, Paddy wants to know if you'll takee her back to Gidgee when you go on Thursday - or is it Friday?"

Venn looked across at her mockingly. He really looked at her for the first time that night. And it was an edifying experience. Curiously, there was something deeply satisfying to Paddy just in having "Venn Wildash look at her. I must be a masochist, she chided herself silently as she stared back into that ironical and undoubtedly inimical blue gaze. She knew that Jeanne was following the conversation, but Annette, gracefully draped on the floor and leaning back against Venn's legs, was not. Agnes, having thrown her stone in

the pond, produced her crocheting from a workbasket and despite the dimness of the lighting, attacked it.

Venn said, "You're out of luck, Paddy. I shan't be going in to Gidgeemallawa after all."

Agnes's head jerked up. "Why ever not, Venn?"

"I had a letter from Steve in the mail," Venn said. He had left his chair - and Annette - carelessly, and crossed the room to find cigarettes, proceeding to light one as he finished speaking. Paddy kept her eyes on him as he stood in the middle of the big room. He shook out the match and sent her a brief glance that was keen as an arrow. "He's changed his mind about coming to us for Christmas. He's found something better to do, I take it - the pursuit of a girl, I rather suspect." He looked back at Paddy. "So unfortunately, you'll have to remain here amongst us."

"Too bad for you," thought Paddy. She bit her lip and hated him, while something in her rejoiced that it had happened this way.

"I suppose I'll live through it," she told him lightly.

"We shall have to make some other arrangement for you," said Agnes with a look of displeasure. "I'm disappointed we shan't be seeing Steven, I was looking forward to seeing how he's developing. Girls already! - and he's only seventeen. So young for a boy, though a girl at that age is quite mature." Her eyes rested on Annette as she spoke.

Paddy didn't stay much longer after that. Venn, in fact, presently offered to escort her home, and she was disconcerted. Annette had flinched, and Miss Wildash had frowned disapprovingly, but Venn apparently noticed nothing, and though Paddy murmured a conventional, "Don't bother," not many minutes later she was out under the vast outback sky alone with Venn.

He remarked coolly as they strolled through the garden, "So it looks like we've got you with us for Christmas, Miss Dempster. Because I'm not prepared to make a special trip in for you in this heat. You should have thought a bit harder before you came haring out here whether you really wanted to stay the vacation out or not. What's happened now? Have Keith's charms palled, or are you suddenly pining for your other love?"

"No," said Paddy briefly to the last question. She thought fleetingly of Phil and knew that the desperation had faded right out of that affair - after just a few weeks! As for Keith, she had never been a victim of his charms, but she surely didn't need to point that up again.

"Why is it you want to be off?"

Paddy debated for a moment. To say it wasn't her idea would be to make a liar of his aunt, and she didn't want to bring that little "talk" into it.

"Does it really matter?" she asked. "I'd have thought you'd be capable of thinking up an answer for yourself, anyhow - adding another paragraph to the highly imaginative character sketch of me that you've been entertaining yourself with."

"Hmm," he said. "Actually there's more of the scientist than the novelist in my make-up. In other words, I'm always willing to discard a premise that's been proved false. True, I judged you a complete baggage when we first met and I found you in a clinch with Keith. Now I'm not so certain. Though surely you had at least an inkling before you came here that Keith was a womanizer." They had crossed the gravel and reached a small grove of cedar trees that grew outside the white fence surrounding the Lewises' bungalow, and suddenly Paddy found herself trapped, his body barring the way. "Are you just a nice little schoolmistress who's come to the outback out of the mistaken goodness of her heart to look after a kid who's being adequately supervised already, Miss Dempster?" His voice was very close and her breath was coming fast. She could feel the warmth of his body, and the sweet scent of the cedar flowers was in her nostrils. A kind of faintness seemed to overpower her, her very legs grew weak, and she sensed it rather than saw when his arms reachedd out for her and she was drawn firmly and deftly close.

Crazily, she was past the stage of protesting by now, her mind barely took in what he said even though she was aware he was suggesting things of her that were just not true. Her lips parted as if she would speak, but there were no thoughts in her head that were clear or coherent enough to utter. And the next instant she was crushed against him, and his mouth was on hers.

It happened completely without her consent, and yet every shred of self-control left her, and her whole body was filled with a sick longing, a fever -

and she clung against the pleasure-giving of his mouth and felt herself submerged by wave after wave of acute physical sensation that was half pain, half unutterable delight... When his lips left hers she heard herself moan faintly, "Oh, kiss me - kiss me-" She heard it as if it were the voice of a stranger and she was appalled.

He didn't comply. The grip of his hands on her arms was suddenly hurtful, and she opened her eyes to find the world reeling and his dimly discernible face looking down at her unreadably, his lips curved, his eyes black shadows. Her reason returned to her abruptly and she drew a sharp breath of dismay. His hands fell from her arms, but otherwise he stayed quite still, staring down at her. She raised a shaking hand to brush back the dark hair that had fallen across her cheek, and her heart sank abysmally. What on earth had taken possession of her?

He said jarringly, "No more kissing. I think we've taken it far enough. It's been - revealing, hasn't it?"

Yes, it had been revealing. But what it had revealed to Venn Wildash was not what it had revealed to her. That you could find a man utterly hateful and yet still be drawn slavishly by the magnetism of his body - could drown in the dark delight of his embrace; that no kiss could be long enough, deep enough; that even such a kiss as that was nothing, that you would die for more. And yet - and yet you would also die rather than let him know it.

And that you hated yourself for being so easily played upon.

She wanted to ask accusingly, "Why did you touch me?" But she knew why he had touched her. He had told her why.

She turned from him quickly, tears of bitterness in her eyes, ran to the gate and down the dark side path by the house, and finally reached the haven of her room. With the door shut behind her, she stood in the dark in a kind of despair. A woman's flesh is weak, and a man like Venn Wildash, strong, passionate, would be hard to resist. Cerebrally, her opinion of him went down and down, even while something primeval and inadmissible in her exulted in the savage maleness of him... But he had been the one to call a halt, while she- Her cheeks burned as she recalled how she had begged him to kiss her again, with the hunger for far more than kisses in her voice.

"I can never look him in the face again - never," she thought later, when she lay sleepless in her bed, tormented by her thoughts and by her empty aching body. Why had she let it happen? With every fibre of her being she wished that she had not, and she wished too that Agnes Wildash could have had her desire, and that Paddy Dempster could have been out of Bibbenluke for ever by the end of the week.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHRISTMAS DAY was to be spent at Bibbenluke homestead. And in the meantime, Paddy didn't catch so much as a glimpse of Venn Wildash. No doubt he saw to that.

Beth had decided finally to make a clay model of her projected sculpture, and it suited her admirably for Paddy to more or less take charge, of both the children and the house. It suited Paddy too. It kept her hands and her mind occupied, and it kept her well out of Keith's way and made her feel she was of some use. She planned the meals, got to know Vera, and managed the children. At the same time, she busied herself making small gifts for Christmas - embroidered handkerchiefs for Beth and Agnes and the Duncan girls, using fine lawn from the station store, and hand puppets for the children, which needed only scraps. For the men, failing to think up anything better, she cooked up a patch of fudge she had learned to make in England as a child, and did it up in pretty wrappings. She also wrote Christmas letters to her friends in Sydney, and all in all the days passed very quickly.

Beth's sculpture by this time was to be a semi-abstract mother and child, which was something of an innovation for her.

"Max won't like it much," she told Paddy, who had brought a pot of freshly made tea on to the vine-screened verandah where she was working meticulously on her clay model. "He'll try hard, but he prefers things to look more or less exactly as they are." She wiped her hands on a damp cloth, then

perched on the verandah rail to drink the tea Paddy had handed her. "Venn on the other hand has a surprisingly sophisticated appreciation of art. And I mean real art, not my efforts. In fact, he has several books on the subject that he's let me borrow. It's a pity you haven't been able to get to know him better, you might find you have quite a lot in common. But all his free time's taken up with those girls these days."

"And thank goodness for that," thought Paddy. She didn't want to talk about Venn Wildash. She had been schooling herself not even to think of him, and she changed the subject adroitly.

"How did you learn to sculpt, Beth - and to model in clay?"

Beth gave a little smile. "Art was always my pet subject at school. Father was a stock and station agent and we lived in Orange where there's always plenty going on, but after I was married and came to the outback, I was rather frustrated. None of the children I'd planned on having seemed to be turning up, and so I started playing around a bit with three-dimensional art - which I'd always liked best. Then one summer, Max nobly persuaded me that he could live without me for a while and I went off to Sydney and enrolled in a class at a suburban art centre. I missed Max and the outback badly, but I stuck at it for three months and then I stocked up with a few books and some materials and came home to my loving husband." She paused to light a cigarette and looked across at Paddy half humorously as she drew on it. "Reward for our three months' separation - in ten months I had a brand new

baby, Simon. But I was hooked by then, and I didn't give it up. It seemed to add an extra meaning to life. And I'm very lucky in having an understanding husband and a sturdy, sensible, lovable child. Yes, I'm an indulged woman. The only cross I have to bear is Keith."

"Keith?" repeated Paddy, surprised. It was not often Beth had so much to say. She had heard Agnes's angle on Keith, she had had her own experience of him, and she wondered what Beth had to say.

"Yes. Keith's always been a bit of a devil, even at school," Beth admitted ruefully. "He's a lot younger than the rest of us, and a whole lot wilder. We haven't always been able to keep track of him. He's sown plenty of wild oats, but this time he's really decided to settle down and mend his ways. That's why he's here. One quiet unblemished year on Bibbenluke and he'll be right for eternal respectability and an overseer's job. Unless he decides to go into the family business with his brothers. He left his last job under a bit of a cloud, I suspect, but he hasn't offered any info about it, and so I haven't asked. Knowing Keith, I guess it would be something to do with a woman, that's all. Hardly a crime - there's no real harm in him. And in my view, it takes two to get into that kind of mischief... Ah well, thanks for the tea, pet. Now I must get back to work."

Paddy wondered a little if there had been any particular purpose in that little sketch of Keith's life and character. Was it a warning not to fall for him? Or an assurance that if she did, he was ready to make good? - which Paddy

couldn't quite bring herself to believe. Agnes said he was bad, and she was not sure that she believed that, either. In any case, she knew that she wouldn't be indulging his partiality for an affair of any sort.

Christmas Day was exhaustingly hot. It began early for the children, as it does for most children at Christmas, and both Simon and Margaret were up so early that long before midday they were exhausted and had fallen asleep on their beds. Margaret was a little bit tearful about not seeing her mother and father, but as a number of loving gifts had come along with her, it was not so bad. Her big disappointment was that her baby sister or brother had not yet arrived, for she had quite set her heart on this as a kind of super Christmas present.

Late in the afternoon the Lewises, the children, Paddy and Keith went over to the homestead. Though Paddy felt almost desperately nervous about seeing Venn again, the first little while passed easily enough as greetings were exchanged, and it was not long before Simon and Margaret dragged her off to see the Christmas tree in the garden, garlanded with coloured lights that would shine at night.

"We're having two Christmases," said Margaret happily, and Simon, with the experience of four and a half years, said sturdily, "We always do, Margaret. And Uncle Venn always puts toys under his tree for us too."

Later Paddy joined the others near a table that had been set up in the garden and was laden with cold drinks and a variety of savouries and nuts

and sweets and fruits to suit everyone's taste. The children helped Venn distribute the gifts that had been placed under the Christmas tree, and Paddy found herself the recipient of a number of small presents, nothing at all embarrassingly lavish, and she thanked each donor in turn.

And then she received Venn's gift. It was a tiny but alluring vanity mirror with a silver and enamel back. She knew very well that it was probably one of a number of small things he kept handy for just such an occasion as this, and yet she could not help being ridiculously pleased. She held it up and her grey eyes looked back at her shinningly, and suddenly she wondered a little wryly if Venn had chosen it as a reminder to her to be less careless about her appearance. It was not a very worthy thought and she put it from her quickly.

Venn came across the grass to thank her for the fudge then - which he did without even a token kiss, to her relief. He said good-humouredly, "Did you know I had a sweet tooth, Paddy, or did you think I needed sweetening up?"

Their eyes met and then both of them laughed, and Paddy's heart felt curiously warmed. Quick tears came into her eyes, so that she had to turn her head away - and receive Keith's thank-you kiss for his gift.

She still had a little pile of mail to deal with, and she determinedly returned to that - letters and cards that had been sent on by Phil's mother and delivered to Bibbenluke by the mail truck the day before. There was nothing at all from Phil or Diana, but a letter from Mrs. Kennedy told her that

no wedding was being planned for the immediate future. Paddy found that none of it affected her very much. Not so long ago it would have been agonizing not to hear from Phil at Christmas, and to know that a wedding date had not yet been set might even have made her hope that Phil would yet return to her...

She was thinking about all this when she discovered that Venn had come back and had taken a chair near hers.

"Satisfied with your Sydney mail?" he asked, watching her intently. "Was it worth waiting for? You could have had it yesterday, in fact, but my aunt is sentimental and thought it should all be kept for Christmas Day."

"I'm well satisfied, thank you," said Paddy, looking at the decorated tree rather than at him. He was just too close for comfort. "I heard from everyone I hoped to hear from."

"Well, that's fine." He added dryly, "Better hide that little pile from Beth, however. You've painted such a harrowing picture of yourself as the poor little waif who has no one-" He broke off suddenly, and Paddy, who had up till then managed to avoid meeting his gaze, looked up unwarily and found herself the recipient of a stare so blue and concentrated that immediately the bright colour flew into her cheeks. He seemed mockingly amused, which made her furious and helpless as well.

"I was about to apologize," Venn said. "I'm sorry I started on that tack - we should call a truce today."

Paddy couldn't answer. She wished she could have smiled and said something casual, but she felt too shaken. She was remembering vividly, too, that night when he held her in his arms and kissed her, and she had responded so abandonedly. As if he read her disturbed thoughts, he said briskly, "Calm down, Paddy. We're all human."

And then, as if it were useless trying to treat her normally, he moved away in Annette's direction.

She was exclaiming over some gift she had just removed from its wrapping paper - a paua shell tiki on a long silver chain, which she proceeded to fasten around her neck. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes bright, and Paddy wondered if it was a gift from Venn until he remarked, his brows raised fractionally, "That looks as if it came from New Zealand, Annette."

"It did." She looked at Venn, then down at the tiki, which she touched lingeringly with one finger. Paddy felt somehow shocked when Agnes Wildash said chillingly, "A rubbishy ornament like that doesn't do anything for your pretty dress, Annette."

Annette said nothing. She looked a little crestfallen and Venn looked suddenly thoughtful.

In one way or another, Paddy found the day a difficult one. She so definitely didn't belong, she was so obviously the rank outsider. Johnny Heath had gone home for Christmas and for his annual vacation, so she didn't even have the comfort of his presence. The remedy was to spend all her time with

the children, and this she did, so far as she was allowed, for Beth or Max or Keith came constantly to haul her away to join in some discussion. Agnes or Venn, never...

After a long and late and luscious dinner, they all returned to the garden to relax near the lighted tree, which was a source of never-failing fascination for the children. They smoked, drank more champagne, and listened to the records, mostly pop songs, that Jeanne and Annette put on the portable player. For her part, Paddy found more enjoyment in the scent of the flowers and the slight breeze that had sprung up to cool the night air - and the relief of darkness - and presently she moved away from the music to listen to Max, who was instructing the children about the stars. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one of the Duncan girls walk away and the other - Annette, of course, she thought - go to sit on the arm of Venn's chair. She saw him raise his hand to stroke the blonde hair, and felt a shocking pang of jealousy. Jealousy? Was that what it was? It was an unpalatable thought and she shied away from it in disbelief, and leaving Max and the children, she began to walk about the dark garden on her own, so as not to be aware of those two and their fond and intimate gestures. It was the first time she had seen a display of tenderness from Venn to either of the Duncan girls, and rightly or wrongly, she found it unsettling.

She walked slowly through the garden, pausing near the small pool to admire Beth's bobtail lizard, then wandering through the trees and shrubs

that lay between garden and orchard. She was brought up abruptly by the sight of two people, half lying, half sitting on the grass, and locked together in a passionate embrace. Keith and it must be the quiet Jeanne, since Annette was back there with Venn. Paddy felt a little sickened. Well, champagne and kisses go together, she decided, turning quickly away. But she was surprised that Jeanne should have fallen for Keith's spurious charm, and she wondered what Beth would have thought to see her brother so obviously in pursuit of the boss's "quarry". Still, in all fairness, it was not Annette.

But in that she was mistaken, for as she was retracing her steps silently, she heard Venn's low angry voice come from somewhere in the tree. "Annette, for God's sake - won't you ever learn?"

Annette, thought Paddy, hurrying on quietly. Then had it been Jeanne perched on the arm of Venn's chair a few minutes ago?

Suddenly she wanted to go home - for the day to be over.

She found the children. Simon was practically asleep on his feet, and Margaret too was ready for bed. It was a relief to sit with one of them on each side of her, while she told them a story...

And then blessedly it was time to go. Paddy said her farewells and expressed her thanks, and she didn't care much that Agnes Wildash was decidedly cool and offhand to her, or that Venn gave her no more than a brief impersonal smile.

Half-way back to the bungalow, she discovered that she had left her little pile of letters behind.

"Take Paddy back for them," Beth said at once to Keith, as if eager for the two young people to be off on their own. Paddy would have protested that it could wait till next day except that she didn't relish the thought of going over to the homestead on her own. So she resigned herself, and set off with Keith - who, in the star-dappled shade of a tree, managed not unexpectedly to get his arms tightly about her.

"I'm not interested in kissing you, Keith," Paddy told him wearily, turning her face aside and frustrated that male strength was so inescapable.

"Oh, don't be so hard to get on with," he said. "It's Christmas - and all you've given me so far is a peck on the cheek. You must think I'm inhuman if that's supposed to be enough. Just one kiss, Paddy love."

She presented her cheek, and wished he would not grip her shoulders so hard.

"Your lips, honey," he persisted, fighting for them, and exactly then, just as it had happened at the orange orchard, Venn put in an appearance. And he was, unaccountably, furiously angry. Surely, Paddy found herself thinking as he forcibly removed her from Keith's embrace, surely a kiss at Christmas was permissible - and even to be expected! She heard herself flare, "Why can't you mind your own business, Venn Wildash?"

He turned on her with fury. She could see the glitter of his angry eyes and the savage set of his mouth, and she had the feeling, just as clear and strong as any intuitive feeling she had ever had about him, that he would like to choke the life out of her. In fact, his fingers momentarily closed about her slender neck while Keith stood, hands in pockets, aloof and faintly smiling.

"You're not full tonight, Keith - but maybe you are, Miss Dempster. You're a menace to have around the place ! I wish to God I'd never set eyes on you, that you'd never found your mischievous, troublesome way here!"

Paddy had begun to shiver, as if in fear that he would crush, kill, choke her, yet now she was uncertain if he had actually had his fingers around her throat or if she had simply imagined it.

"Here," he said with fury, "take your damn letters!"

Paddy took the letters he thrust into her hands. He had evidently been on his way to take them to her so that she wouldn't have any excuse for calling at the homestead tomorrow. But she wasn't going to be treated this way - to listen to him meekly, head hanging, and she said with a fiery hauteur, "I know you're boss of Bibbenluke station, Mr. Wildash, but does that give you the right to be-" She stopped abruptly. To be general censor of morals, she had been about to say. But somehow it was one thing to speak her mind to Venn Wildash when they were alone, and quite another to do so in Keith's presence. It was as if her quarrel with Venn were an entirely private and personal one... And in any case, shouldn't Keith be the one to tell Venn to mind his own

business? Yet it seemed that Keith always threw in his hand immediately when Venn caught him out — in anything at all. Which' implied - the thoughts followed each other lightning-quick through Paddy's mind - which implied that, since Keith wasn't utterly spineless, Venn must have made certain conditions when he took him on at Bibbenluke. In which case, either Keith was ready to take a lot.or Venn knew rather more about Keith's last job - and the cloud that hung about his dismissal from it - than Beth did. Which didn't look too well for Keith.

And now Keith said expressionlessly, "Venn's the boss all right, Paddy. Good night," and simply walked off.

Paddy faced Venn in the starlight. Now she was alone with him. Chin up, she asked angrily, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you go around breaking up - breaking up love scenes?"

There was a brief silence and in the dark she saw his eyebrows lift sardonically. "Love scenes? Does your generation equate sex with love? Or are you telling me that you're in love with Keith?"

"I'm not telling you a single thing," said Paddy. "I'm asking you a simple question. That's twice tonight you've - you've shoved your frame in on Keith-"

She broke off and he stood considering her. "So you were somewhere around when he was fascinating Annette, were you? Do you think it would

have been better for me to look in the other direction when Annette is more or less in my care?"

Paddy stared at him with a feeling of bafflement. She said uncertainly, "Annette's old enough to-"

"Eighteen and a half, and decidedly immature mentally and emotionally if not physically... As for you, I've all the problems I want with Keith without having you here to complicate matters. If you wished him well, you'd keep away from him. His sister would like to see him make good. If it weren't for her, I'd-"

"Boot him out," said Paddy scornfully. And added, to her own surprise, "Is it his fault he's attractive to women?"

"He's a womanizer," said Venn flatly.

Paddy, even though she had no desire in the world to stand up for Keith, said perversely, "What about you? The other night-"

"The other night?" he repeated. "It was I who exercised some self-control, you might remember," he told her dryly. "Had it been left to you, would you have stopped me from taking anything I wanted from you?"

She felt herself crimson. "Of course I would have! I'm not in the habit of - of-"

"Habit starts with one slip," he said callously. "To take another angle on it - could you have stopped me?"

Of course she couldn't have. She would have had a better chance of stopping Keith, because Keith didn't affect her physically as Venn did. But God forbid she should tell him that! As far as Annette was concerned - well, how was she to know whether or not Annette, who had said she adored Venn, was physically attracted to Keith? And maybe Annette was just as innocent as Paddy was herself... She began to wish she hadn't started to argue with Venn.

"Right," said Venn, as if he were reading her thoughts. "So in case you haven't already worked it out for yourself, let me spell it out for you that on some levels, civilized man isn't very far removed from his primitive origins. It's a fact you'd do well to digest and think on, and make part of your general defence equipment, so you won't get yourself into dangerous situations. It's something you might already have deduced from your - I would hazard - fairly extensive experimentation with the other sex. But some girls are lucky even if they don't deserve to be, and I don't believe you've yet learned your lesson in the most unequivocal way of all. And I don't intend you should learn it that way while you're here. On my property."

He stopped at last, and she could hear her own fast breathing. What a lecture! - an undeserved one at that.

And what a low opinion of her he had! Heavens, what sort of a girl did he think she was? Had Peggy, whoever she might have been in his life, taught him to look at women this way? If so, then appearances are deceptive, for she was sure it was Peggy's photograph in his sittingroom. But of course

appearances are deceptive - she thought of Annette, lying about on the grass so abandonedly with Keith. It made Paddy feel more than a little sick, and if she were honest that she must admit she was glad Venn had come along and broken that up. For her own part, no one but Venn had ever broken through her reserves so devastatingly. She was not promiscuous...

"Now I'll escort you home," he said curtly. "And by heaven, if I ever find you playing the wanton with Keith again, I'll choke the life out of you! Put two passions together and there's a conflagration."

Paddy swallowed down her anger and kept her lips firmly closed. So he would choke the life out of her, would he? What a curious expression to use - for he could not possibly mean it. And why such vehemence - such anger - for her? Had he uttered the same fearful threat to Annette earlier in the night? Had those fingers of his closed warningly around Annette's throat too?

Keith is bad, Agnes Wildash had said, and she had urged Paddy Dempster to go away and forget him. But Paddy rather thought, as she walked in silence towards the Lewises' house, that it was the man beside her, Venn Wildash, from whom she was in most danger...

Beth was on the verandah talking to Keith when Paddy came up the steps.

"For goodness' sake, Keith, what's the idea going off with Annette the way you did tonight? Can't you leave Venn's girl-friend alone?"

"Good God, Betsy, it was only fun. Besides, she wanted to kiss me-"

"I think it was you who wanted to kiss her," Beth retorted, as Paddy approached with a deliberately loud tread.

"Well, she didn't object," said Keith. He looked at Paddy. "What do you think of the law of Bibbenluke, Paddy? Three girls for the boss, none for the workers."

"Now, Venn's not laying claim to Paddy, Keith," Beth protested.

"No? He's laying claim to everyone. He expects me to be completely celibate - he wants to order my personal life as well as my working life." His eyes had a recklessness about them that Paddy didn't like much, and she thought uneasily, "Beth doesn't really know much about her brother."

But in the days that followed, Keith got on with his work and Paddy wasn't bothered by him. Beth decided that he was settling down nicely after all, and remarked to Paddy that she would be relieved if he did so. Her two other brothers, both of them years older than Keith, had taken over their father's stock and station agency, and though it had been taken for granted that Keith would join them, he had been determinedly independent - the younger brother wanting to make his own way and not be pushed about. That fitted in with Paddy's picture of Keith, and yet he let Venn Wildash push him about. Within limits. And Paddy was aware of something that Beth was apparently not - there was a kind of brooding malevolence about Keith lately, as though he were hatching some plan. Of revenge?

But it was not because of Venn's threat that Paddy steered clear of him. She didn't want to give Beth the impression that she was in the least likely to fall in love with him. Her first impression of him had been the right one. There was something conscienceless, unprincipled - even callous about him. It was hard to put one's finger on it, but for Paddy it cancelled out every scrap of charm he possessed. It was all a great pity, because his sister was so thoroughly nice. The days passed - hot summer days that saw the plains sizzling under the sun. The long grasses yellowed and dried, the grasshopper population dwindled; the harshly strident chorus of the cicadas continued, and the birds gathered screechingly around the waterholes every sundown. No new plan had been forthcoming to remove Paddy from the Bibbenluke property, though whether Agnes Wildash was trying to hatch something out she didn't know as she never saw her. Beth was now so deeply engrossed in her sculpture - she was still working on her big clay model - that she was openly grateful to have Paddy around to see to things. This, she said, was going to be the best sculpture she had ever done.

Paddy began to feel safe, rested, almost to consider herself one of the family. And to part-way forget the uncomfortable sensations Venn aroused in her. Yet it was considerably harder to forget Venn than it had been to forget Phil. Proximity, Paddy decided. If someone is only a few hundred yards away - only next door - you can't completely banish them from your thoughts. There is always the possibility of a meeting, and certainly she did see Venn now and again - when he came to take the children out riding, or when he

called in at the end of the day to confer with Max, and then his blue intense gaze would seek her out, would settle on her in a speculative way of which she became supersensitively aware. He was thinking, she was sure, but what? What did he think of her? - when he had little to say to her beyond hello.

Like Keith, she was there on sufferance. And the knowledge, when she allowed it, made her edgy, hostile, so that in a curious way she felt she would welcome an open argument, a set-to, with Venn Wildash, to clear the air. She had never felt this way about anyone before, and it was unnerving.

Then came a day that was utterly, exhaustingly hot. Beth covered her clay with damp rags and left it alone, and she and Paddy spent most of the daylight hours seeking out the shade and drinking countless cups of tea, or glasses of iced lemonade, while the children played in the plastic paddling pool that had been Simon's Christmas present, and over which Max had rigged a canvas awning.

During the afternoon, Annette arrived in Agnes Wildash's small car. Like Paddy and Beth, she wore shorts, but her sleeveless top was trendy and feminine, and under her white cotton hat, her hair was tied in a bunch at each side of her face. Just like the girl in the photo, Paddy reflected thoughtfully. Like - Peggy?

"Aunt Agnes said I could drive down to the billabong if someone would come with me," she announced as she climbed the steps to the vine-shrouded verandah to which Paddy and Beth had not long before shifted. "Jeanne says

it's too hot, so will you come, Paddy? Please do - my mouth just hangs open at the thought of the billabong. It will be great just to sit with our legs dangling in the water, not moving an inch."

Paddy didn't particularly want to go. Like Jeanne, she thought it was too hot. All she could think of was how marvellous it would be when the coppery sun had disappeared from the sky and darkness had come. It mightn't be what you would call cool then, but at least the glare, the fierceness would be gone.

"Please, Paddy," said Annette wheedlingly. "I'm never even allowed to drive as a rule, and it's too good a chance to pass up."

"Go if you want, Paddy," said Beth, whose arms hung limply down as she lay back on the cane lounger. "The childrenn are quite okay. And see you take care, Annette."

Paddy got up a little reluctantly. It didn't seem fair to spoil Annette's fun, but it was amazing to think she had the energy to be up and on the go on a day like this. Paddy went to her room for sandals, her straw hat, and her swimsuit, and she began to think it would be good to wallow about in the cool water, once one had made the effort to get there:

It was hot as an oven in the car, even with all the windows open, and Annette had some trouble getting into gear and starting up.

"I haven't got my licence yet, actually," she told Paddy. "And Venn will never let me practise. In fact, he just says flatly I'm not to drive - as if you

could possibly have an accident out here! But I wheedled Aunt Agnes into lending me her car today, and I promised I wouldn't go alone, and I assured her you could drive. Can you?"

Paddy raised her eyebrows. "No, I'm afraid I can't." They were by now rattling along the track, and though the bumps were making Annette's steering somewhat erratic, Paddy agreed that surely they couldn't get into much trouble - particularly as they were going no further than the billabong.

Annette was prattling on about Aunt Agnes, and how she still fussed over herself and Jeanne as though they were children.

"It's crazy as bedbugs, because we're grown up now. I mean, you don't flat in a city like Sydney and stay babes in the wood. But she's a darling all the same - and so understanding, mostly, and it's just like home coming here."

Paddy listened and found herself going off into a kind of a daze because it was so hot. Again and again her eye was caught by those two shining bunches of hair under Annette's hat, and she longed to ask about the girl in the photograph.

The sunlight was particularly glaring and she had forgotten to bring dark glasses, so she closed her eyes for a while. Perhaps it was for that reason that she didn't realize they were not heading for the billabong at all - not until Annette braked and asked her to get out and open a gate. Before she had thought, Paddy slid from the hot leather seat into the sizzling sunlight, opened

the gate, waited till Annette had driven through, closed it, and clambered back into the car again.

"I thought we were going to the billabong to swim. Is there another place?"

Annette gave a little smile. "Oh, there are other pools in the river. But I just suddenly thought it would be a bit of a yell to drive over to the leopardwood paddock and surprise Venn. He's there shifting sheep or something, and he'll do a double take when he finds I've driven all that way."

Paddy's nerves immediately became tense - it was a thing that seemed to happen at the very sound of Venn's name.

"If he says you're not to drive, he'll hardly be delighted," she said casually.

"He'll be furious," agreed Annette. "But then he infuriates me, the way he's so cool. He usen't to be like that - quite the opposite. I think it's all because of that accident I had. I was thrown from my horse a few weeks ago and I had concussion. But it wasn't all that serious and I'm absolutely better now, yet the way he treats me you'd think I was made of glass instead of flesh and blood. It's just so aggravating, I think if I make him good and angry it will just unlock the gates." She looked sideways at Paddy. "I suppose you think we're all mad here? I suppose you'll go back to Gidgeemallawa - you teach school there, don't you? - and tell everyone the Bibbenluke lot are crazy."

"Why should I?" said Paddy. Annette was subtly - or not so subtly - pointing out the fact that she was an outsider, but Paddy was preoccupied with another thought. She had made Venn good and angry. He had closed his

fingers round her throat - threatened her. Hadn't he given Annette that treatment on Christmas night when he had caught her with Keith? Paddy would have thought so.

"I suppose you're a bit in love with Keith," said Annette unexpectedly.

"Not in the least," Paddy assured her firmly:

"I thought you were. Aunt's always saying so. Anyhow, I'm glad if you're not, because he has a bit of a crush on me. He just can't keep his eyes off me sometimes - it makes me go all creepy. Venn nearly lost his temper when he caught us kissing the other night."

Nearly. Yet with Paddy - Paddy couldn't figure it out. She couldn't decide either if Annette was just an ingenuous young girl or if she was slinky, kinky, devious. It was hard to imagine her ingenuous if she played about with Keith, yet it was ingenuous - or was it more simply vain? - to think that Keith had a crush on her. As for the story Keith had told her about Venn and Annette so long ago - that was something Paddy did her best to exclude from her mind. She just had no opinion about it at all.

They drove on for some minutes without talking, until Paddy asked, "When do we reach the leopardwood paddock, Annette?"

"We've reached it," said Annette. "It's just a pretty big paddock, that's all. I'm sure Venn'll be over the other side of those leopardwoods - with a big fat mob of sheep worth hundreds and thousands of dollars."

But when they had driven through the trees - an experience Paddy didn't particularly enjoy with Annette at the wheel, and driving too fast - there was no big fat mob of merinos. There were sheep grazing there, it was true, but they were scattered far and wide, and there was no sign of Venn or of anyone else.

"How stupid," said Annette, widening her round golden eyes. "I'm sure I heard him say he was coming here." She brought the car to a halt and leaned back against the seat, pushing her hat to the back of her head and touching those two bunches of hair. As if, thought Paddy, they had been there especially for Venn's benefit - as perhaps they were.

With this thought in mind, she asked on impulse, "Who is Peggy, Annette?"

Annette stared at her and touched her hair again. "Don't you know?"

Paddy shook her head. "How should I?"

"Doesn't Beth tell you anything? I guess all she does is mess about with her stone chipping. It must be deadly dull for you, no wonder you wanted to go back to Gidgeemallawa."

"I didn't," said Paddy briefly.

"Aunt Agnes said you did." Annette was now peering in the rear-vision mirror, and, while Paddy reflected that Aunt Agnes seemed to have quite a few opinions about Paddy Dempster, Annette was tilting her head and smiling at herself in a way that certainly reminded Paddy of that photograph. "I am like Peggy," said Annette. "Particularly with my hair done this way - I

did want Venn to see. Aunt Agnes says when I pull my hair back you can see I have the same shaped face. And even if I haven't got blue eyes, I can get the same look in them." She broke off and turned towards Paddy as if for her confirmation, and Paddy glimpsed again that hectic, feverish look. "She was Venn's wife."

Paddy drew a sharp little breath as if of pain. Subconsciously, she had guessed that Peggy had been Venn's wife, but in some strange way it was still a shock, and she felt it like an ache in her heart. Because Peggy had been killed in a plane crash? Or because - it set him apart?

"Jeanne and I met her when we were children," said Annette, "ages ago. That awful summer when she and our mother and granddad were all killed. Venn's father had a small plane for use on the property, and my grandfather used to take it up to look over the dams and see where the sheep were and all that sort of thing. He wasn't just the overseer, you know - he was sort of the brains at Bibbenluke, when Mr Wildash was old and Venn hadn't come home. He died soon after Venn and Peggy were married, and Venn was pretty young and he used to depend on Granddad for everything. Anyhow, our mother liked to go up in the plane too, she loved the bush, and our father had cleared out and left her by then," said Annette cheerfully. "I think Mummy had brought us back to Bibbenluke meaning for us all to live here. Anyway, they were all killed. Peggy went up too. Venn didn't want her to, we were just kids then, nine or ten, but I still remember that. I didn't know why,

then, but I know now - Aunt Agnes said she was expecting a baby. I don't know what went wrong with the plane, I don't think anyone does, but it crashed, and Venn tore off in one of the cars, but they were all killed, and that was it."

"How terrible for you all," said Paddy, her face white despite the heat and the perspiration that was running down her neck.

"Yes, it was," agreed Annette. "But when you're a child you get over things, and everyone was very kind to us, and Aunt Agnes and Venn sent us off to boarding school as soon as the holidays were over."

Paddy looked at her curiously. Annette saw it all from her own angle - as though she were still a child. With nothing to say for Venn who had lost his young wife, his expected child, so suddenly and tragically... Perhaps this was at the root of Venn's apparent heartlessness - it was a defence against further shattering hurt.

"After that," said Annette with an expression almost of satisfaction, "we belonged to Bibbenluke, and I fell in love with Venn when I was about twelve. I just used to dream about marrying him, it was terribly romantic, belonging to him like we did. When holidays came, I used to get sick with excitement. Jeanne was never like that - she's not as emotional as I am, she's placid and sensible. But I was always Venn's favourite - always." She looked at Paddy, her round amber eyes like drops of honey, and Paddy thought, "It's just not true, what Keith said. I've been mad even to think it might be true - Annette's

still a child." And yet - and yet there were times when Annette's look said very plainly, "I've tasted of the tree of knowledge." And of course that could tie up with her adoration of Venn.

Annette made a sudden restless movement. "We might as well go to the swimming hole after all. It's just too hot to live, isn't it? Anyhow, I think I know a short cut - we can be there in five minutes."

The short cut proved to be not a short cut after all - and a big mistake in any case. They got safely across the vastness of the leopardwood paddock, which they left by a different gate, and then Annette deserted the wheel tracks and began to steer the car on an erratic course through the long straw-coloured grass. It was an uncomfortably bumpy ride and at some time or another Paddy discovered her straw hat had disappeared - possibly it had fallen out of the car when she got out to open the gate. "This is a nightmare," she thought, as she hung on to the edge of the seat, her body sticky with perspiration, forcing herself to say nothing to Annette who, she couldn't help thinking, should never have left those wheel tracks.

But at last it got to be too much for her, and she said somewhat curtly, "Hadn't we better get back to the track again - if we can find it?" She never knew what Annette's answer to that would have been because at that precise moment, the inevitable happened. There was a sickening jolt, as the car went over a spiky tree stump concealed in the long grasses, and they had a flat tyre.

CHAPTER SIX

"HELL!" said Annette emphatically. She sat and stared ahead of her as if stupefied. "Now I'll be in trouble."

"Can't we put the spare on?" Paddy wanted to know. Even she could do that - she had learned something about changing a tyre from helping Phil do it, and the memory of it didn't bring the slightest ache to her heart. She opened the car door and climbed out into searing heat.

Annette stayed where she was. "We don't have a spare. I didn't bother asking Jim to bring it across from the shed."

"What?"

"Oh, don't look at me like that. It's not all my fault: Aunt Agnes had a puncture and I was supposed to see that Jim had brought the spare back, but it was just too hot to mess about, so I didn't."

Paddy refrained from comment and asked merely, "So what do we do?"

"We can walk," said Annette petulantly. "It's not all that far - I know where we are. I'm certainly not going to sit here broiling and bored stiff waiting for someone to come out and look for us. And find us," she added.

Paddy thought about walking. She wasn't at all certain that Annette did know where they were; also, she no longer had a hat.. She said uncertainly, "It's still scorchingly hot -"

Annette shrugged. "So what? You can please yourself, of course, but I'm going. I can't stand inaction."

"Wouldn't - Venn expect us to stay where we are? We could sit in the shade of the trees, and - I suppose we do have some water?"

"Oh yes, there's always water in the car," said Annette indifferently. "But I'm not going to sit around twiddling thumbs, even if Venn would expect it. I'm going to walk, and he can be just as angry as he likes. At least it will get it out of his head that I'm a sort of permanent convalescent you can't even say boo to." She climbed out of the car as she spoke and tossing no more than a casual, "Are you coming?" in Paddy's direction she began to walk.

After only a moment Paddy began to follow the other girl through the long still grasses that felt dry and sharp against her bare legs.

"Are you sure you know the way?" she asked Annette's back.

"Of course I do. Don't worry, we're not going to get lost."

Maybe not, thought Paddy, but they would certainly both be burned as red as lobsters - particularly Paddy Dempster, who didn't even have the protection of a hat. Certainly the sun was now on its way down the sky, but it was still unendurably hot and there was not even the vestige of a breeze. The sky was utterly and completely cloudless, and away on the horizon was the

low shimmering line of a range of flat-topped hills, so ephemeral-looking one felt sure they were no more than an illusion. Otherwise, the world was flat and totally empty.

Annette kept to the trees - mulgas, acacias, leopardwoods, the occasional tall red gum - and Paddy followed her. They plodded on in silence, both of them worried by the flies and Paddy worried additionally by that fierce heat on the top of her head. Perspiration ran down both their faces, and Paddy very soon began to wonder how much of it she could take. But Annette showed not the slightest sign of flagging. Venn was certainly going to be impressed. No girl who wasn't in excellent physical condition could attack such a walk so determinedly, and Paddy wondered whether it would bring about the required effect. Whether Venn would be angry, or whether he would be delighted and...

"How far do you think we have to go?" she asked Annette, and even to speak required an effort.

"A couple of miles," said Annette. "Maybe three." The way she spoke, the distance sounded negligible, and Paddy told herself determinedly, "If she can do it, so can I," and on she walked.

She didn't know how far they had gone when she came upon the bobtail lizard. It appeared suddenly right in her path, its ferocious pink mouth wide, showing a blue triangle of tongue, its eyes staring up at her unnervingly. Despite herself she felt a shock of fright and she took a sudden careless step to

one side and felt an agonizing wrench as she twisted her ankle. She was thrown right off balance and fell awkwardly to the ground, while the lizard waddled quickly away and ran up the trunk of a tree. Paddy stayed where she was for a few seconds, tears of pain in her eyes.

Annette was several yards ahead and walked on steadily, completely unconscious of anything that was happening behind her. Paddy tried to struggle to her feet, but the pain in her ankle was too much and she sank down on the ground again, and called out urgently, "Annette!"

She called twice before Annette stopped and looked back.

"What's the matter?"

"I've twisted my ankle."

Annette looked exasperated, but she came back.

"Can't you get up?"

"I'll try again," said Paddy, taking the hand that Annette held out to her. She pulled herself upright, but the moment she put some weight on her foot the pain was there again, sharp and searing. Her face whitened, her forehead was clammy and she thought she would be sick. "I'm sorry - I just won't be able to walk." She sat down on the ground again and hung her head low to bring the blood back to it. She didn't care in the least where she sat, whether it was on an ants' nest or anywhere at all, she only knew that if she didn't assume a more or less horizontal position she would pass out. And she quite definitely couldn't walk back to Bibbenluke.

When her head had stopped spinning she looked up and found Annette watching her, those two bunches of hair gleaming against her bare brown shoulders. Annette's face was just a little flushed and moist with the heat, but she didn't look to be very much bothered by it, and Paddy envied her.

"You do look sick. You're a real city girl, aren't you? Shall I go back to the car and fetch some water, or will you be all right here till I fetch help from Bibbenluke? I shouldn't be all that long."

Paddy managed a wry smile. It was futile now to wish she hadn't put her foot in that hole. It had happened, and she was going to have to sit here and wait to be rescued, and then she would be hobbling about uselessly, a nuisance to everyone. So Venn would think. Well, there was nothing to be done about it except to hope that when Annette got back to the homestead, it would be Beth or even Agnes who would come to her rescue. Anyone but Venn.

But of course it was Venn.

The last rays of the sun had gone, slanting burning red across the wide plains. The long yellow grasses had faded from fiery copper strands to black silhouettes, the last parrot had screeched and squawked its way from the place where it had watered to the tree under which Paddy sat. A kangaroo had leaped by with a Joey in its pouch, and the cicadas had set the whole world shaking with their deafening chorus, heralding a hot night. Paddy was cramped and terribly thirsty, and more than a little afraid that Annette had

somehow lost her way. To keep herself from speculating on that, she concentrated once more on the big eucalyptus that sheltered her. There was a great oval sheet cut out of its bark, leaving a scar that looked age-old, and she occupied her mind wondering about that scar - wondering if the blacks had made it long ago, and if so, why.

It was all but dark when she heard the car coming, and inwardly she collapsed with relief - and hoped she didn't look too much of a wreck, whoever it might be in that car. In a moment the car reached her the door opened, and Venn, his hair looking dark in the dusky light, seemed to float towards her. She heard herself say senselessly, "I've been inventing stories about that tree-"

He stared at her and he stared at the tree, then he squatted down on his haunches beside her. "What the hell are you talking about, Paddy? Are you all right?"

"Yes." She was weeping a little and pretending not to - because it had been a long and awful wait, and she had been quite certain something had happened to Annette. And there had been ants and flies - and that lizard again - and she had been thirstier than she had ever been in her life. "Where's Annette? It's been - so long! Did she get home all right?"

"Eventually," Venn said dryly. He had produced a flask from his pocket, and now he unscrewed it and poured something into the cap. "Here - it's water. Drink all you want."

She drank thirstily, her hand shaking as she held the small metal cup.

"More?"

She nodded, and he refilled the cup and while she drank lit a cigarette. Darkness had come now - complete moonless darkness, with a few hot white stars that didn't help. The night was like a thick suffocating blanket thrown over the burning body of the outback. There was not the faintest stirring in the air. An owl screamed and something rustled and scuffled in a heap of dry bark and gum leaves nearby, and Paddy knew had she been on her own she would have been scared half to death. Now, as Venn still held his lighted match, she could see his face - the square jaw, the dark line of the thick eyebrows, the always astonishing gold of his hair. And the shine of his eyes that were as alive as jewels. There was a sudden warmth in her breast that had nothing to do with an outback summer. She could hear her pulses and she imagined she could hear Venn's heart beating too.

Then he shook out the match, took the cup, and handed her the cigarette he had just lit.

"Here - your nerves need this."

Obediently she drew on the cigarette, then began to cough.

"Why didn't you tell me you don't smoke? I certainly don't want to start you on a bad habit." He took the cigarette back, and began to smoke it himself, almost absentmindedly. "Now let's see what you've done to yourself, Paddy Dempster. I take it you've really been incapacitated or you wouldn't

have stayed here all by yourself. Still, you asked for it. It's a pity you couldn't have been satisfied with a jaunt to the billabong, you must have seen Annette's got no hope of ever being a driver. The two of you should have stayed together in the car, you know - it was sheer idiocy to try to walk all that way home." As he spoke he was gently but competently examining Paddy's now badly swollen and very tender ankle, and finally he pronounced, "No bones broken, at any rate. Hot and cold foment, a good firm bandage and a bit of a rest, and you'll be able to use it in a couple of days."

Paddy nodded. She was pondering on what he had said earlier. Did he think it was her fault that they hadn't settled for the billabong? Hadn't Annette told him they were looking for him? Well, there was no real point in arguing that out just now. She simply asked, "Is Annette all right?"

"She's dead beat and her feet are blistered and her nose is burnt. Otherwise she's great." His voice was curt now, and Paddy wondered, had he lost his cool? Had he been angry - or worried - and treated her like flesh and blood instead of like glass? Shaken her and then - And then what? Locked her in his arms. Paddy shut off her thoughts abruptly. Or tried to. She knew that Venn Wildash was a passionate man... Venn said, "She had no business driving all over the place. She told you she had permission to go to the billabong. So why the devil did you insist she take you looking for Keith? You could wait till tonight, surely to God."

"For Keith?" Paddy was stunned. "Did Annette tell you that?"

"Annette told me nothing," he snapped. "I had it from my aunt - Annette admitted it to her."

Paddy bit back an angry protest. She simply couldn't follow the reason for such a silly lie. The only possible explanation was that, like a schoolgirl who doesn't want to show up in a bad light, Annette was putting the blame on someone else. She didn't care a button about Paddy, and of course she would want to be trusted with the car another time. "So I cop the lot," thought Paddy resentfully, hating that Venn should imagine she was so enamoured of Keith that she would use Annette to go chasing after him.

She discovered that Venn had helped her to her feet and that she was wincing aloud and leaning heavily on his arm. After a second he swung her bodily from the ground and deposited her in the Land Rover. Then he was in the seat beside her, the headlights were shining through the dark, and they were on their way back to Bibbenluke homestead.

Paddy had said nothing since he had passed on his aunt's information. She still said nothing, though she was wondering whether she should deny it outright. But that would cast a distinctly unfavourable light on Annette, who so adored Venn. Still, it had been a very sneaky thing to do, face-saving at Paddy's expense. Paddy's opinion of Annette was undergoing a subtle change. Ingenuousness no longer seemed to fit. It seemed, as though Annette was a girl without much moral sense - a girl who saw things selfishly from her own angle and didn't much care about anyone else.

"Well, why should I care?" Paddy asked herself as she sat beside Venn, barely interpreting the images that were flashed on her retina as the car lights slid across tree trunks, weirdly shaped stumps, long grasses that made eerie fleeing shadows. Paddy was a bird of passage, she didn't belong here. She was an onlooker - who just might get hurt if she was unlucky. What had happened before she came she didn't know now and probably never would. Maybe Venn and Annette had been in love. How could she tell? And what had come between them she couldn't guess at either, though something must have, because Annette appeared to be employing confused and muddled measures to win him back. Childish measures. Trying to make him angry. Was that how it was? Of one thing only was Paddy certain, and that was that she had no place here, and for that reason she had been mad ever to have let herself develop any intense feelings whatever about Venn Wildash...

They were following a track that ran by the river now, Paddy could tell from the thick belt of trees, and in the headlights of the car she saw birds float down to the water.

"Bourke parrots," said Venn, as if she had asked a question. It was curious how often he seemed to read her mind. "They'll come to water by night as well as by day - particularly on a hot night like this."

"How interesting," said Paddy, bracing herself. Somehow the silence between them had seemed to her to become a permanent thing, a symbolic thing. And the way he had broken it was symbolic too, completely

impersonal. Well, she could show that she understood the game as well as he did. "That tree I was sitting under," she said brightly, "it had a great oval strip of bark cut out of it. I wondered why? Perhaps you know, Mr. Wildash."

"Indeed I do, Miss Dempster." His tone was dry, sardonic, as if he were fully aware of what she was doing. "The blacks in the Murray-Darling region used to make their canoes that way. They stripped a twenty-foot sheet of bark from a tree - just from one side. That way, they had their canoe, and the tree lived. If you keep your eyes open, you'll see there are quite a few such trees still standing. Next time you see one you'll know all about it."

Paddy said "Yes," but she felt a great blankness in her heart. She didn't protest when he told her, "You'd better stay at the homestead for tonight. You'll only be a nuisance to Beth. You'll have to put up with not seeing Keith Laidlawe - but let's hope the deprivation doesn't serve to whet your appetite."

Back at Bibbenluke, he actually carried her up the steps, through the verandah, and into one of the bedrooms. As impersonally as if she had been a bale of wool, she reflected wearily. It was impossible to realize that she had been a victim to the magnetism of his body so short a while ago. Now the magnetism had gone. She hated every second that he held her, and when he deposited her - quite gently - on the bed, she couldn't even look at him.

Agnes Wildash didn't come near her, and it was Venn who presently bathed and bandaged her swollen ankle. Paddy thought, "His aunt doesn't

want me here." But here she must stay, according to Venn's orders, for that night and the next day, at any rate.

Jeanne brought her breakfast to her the following morning and asked sympathetically enough how she was feeling.

"Fine," said Paddy, who had already tried limping about and knew without a doubt that she was going to be really useless today. "When I've eaten my breakfast I'll get dressed and go back where I belong."

"Venn says you're to stay here. But Aunt Agnes-" Jeanne stopped, with a look of confusion, and said instead, "There are some of your things on the verandah that Venn brought over for you. And if you like, I'll ask Keith to come and see you tonight."

Paddy looked at her coolly. "Why should I want Keith to come and see me? I'd far sooner see Beth."

Jeanne bit her lip. "But you were looking for Keith yesterday."

"Was I? Everyone seems to know more about it than I do. However... How's Annette this morning? I heard she's got blisters on her feet and a sunburnt nose. It's too bad."

"It's only her heels and her sunburn's not bad," said Jeanne. But she didn't add, "No thanks to you."

Paddy cut the top from her boiled egg. "I'm sorry she had such a long walk - and I hope it's not all being blamed on me." She left it at that. It would be

petty to tell Jeanne that her sister had lied. It would be better to have it out with Annette when she saw her again.

She stayed more or less put that day. She couldn't go limping over to the Lewises', and to have attempted to do so would only appear to be a gesture to bring attention to herself - and she wasn't getting much attention. It was another scorcher, and Annette didn't come near her, nor did Venn's aunt - for some time. Paddy was well aware she wasn't a welcome visitor. Millie brought her lunch, and Jeanne came to bathe and rebandage her ankle, but she was so clumsy and awkward about it, Paddy had to take over and do it herself. Agnes looked in on her briefly after lunch, with the cold disapproving eyes of a headmistress who has caught a girl out doing something thoroughly naughty. "phasing Keith - after being warned," thought Paddy. And then discovered it was rather more than that.

"It's a pity you couldn't have come back with Annette, since you were both so determined to leave the car," she was told acidly. "If Annette could walk the distance, I'm sure you could, instead of expecting my nephew to go out in search of you after a hard day's work in the heat." She didn't come further than the doorway, and she looked at Paddy's foot - Paddy was lying on top of the bed, as it was too hot for even a sheet - as if she suspected the bandage was a complete fraud. "Well, I suppose you must stay here today, as Venn's left instructions to that effect. But you're just as much nuisance here as you would be to Beth, no matter what you've persuaded Venn."

Paddy's face flamed, and she felt more than a little angry. She bit back a quick retort, and in any case, Miss Wildash had departed. She was sure she wasn't being such a great nuisance - it was not as if Jeanne had anything particularly important to do with herself, and Millie had been perfectly cheerful about bringing her lunch in. But what upset her most of all was the suggestion that she had not hurt her ankle at all and that - yes, that she had deliberately planned to have Venn come to her rescue, and had somehow persuaded him to bring her to the homestead. By and large, Agrees Wildash seemed to look on her as a regular man-eater - though, strangely, she had made no reference to Paddy's supposed determination to find Keith, that had got the girls into all this trouble.

Well, she told herself, making a deliberate effort to calm down, she would go back to Beth's more welcoming home just the minute she could. And if that was construed as a desire to return to Keith's arms - and not only by Agnes - then she couldn't help it. Stay here she could not.

And that was a great pity, because Because what? Lying on the bed, drowsy with the heat, and staring blankly at the odd white ceiling, Paddy asked herself again, "Because what?" Because - she somehow liked the idea of being at Bibbenluke homestead. Just for a little while.

But why - when nobody wanted her here?

Because Venn had brought her here, then. And because Bibbenluke was Venn Wildash's domain. That, quite simply, was all. All? But wasn't that the

whole thing? Venn Wildash had got well and truly under her skin. In ,a way that she hadn't realized, Agnes's suspicions were right. And that was crazy. So the sooner she got back to the other house the better...

She had hobbled on to the side verandah because the heat in her room had become intolerable, and was lying in a cane lounger when Beth came to see her. From where she lay, she could see Annette sleeping in the shade of the cedar trees - sleeping or daydreaming, and wearing nothing but a minute bikini. Beth's arrival was a blessing in more ways than one.

They talked about Paddy's 'little adventure', and Beth said nothing about how it was supposed to have happened, so perhaps she had not been told. She commiserated with her about her swollen ankle, and assured her there were no problems at home. Margaret was behaving like a little angel, as usual, and Vera was providing absolutely all the support that was necessary.

"But don't think the children and I don't miss you, or that you're not a marvellous help, Paddy dear, because it's just not so. Anyhow, I thought you'd like to know, we've heard from Bruce and it looks like Margie's little brother or sister will be arriving any day now. And Bruce has promised to come out and see Margaret as soon as possible after the big event."

"And I shall go back with him," thought Paddy, even while she was saying enthusiastically that it was great news.

Beth went back - to her, irresistible sculpture - and Paddy was left alone. She saw Venn come home, and saw him talking to Annette out in the leafy

shady garden. Adam and Eve. Beings apart. Looking at them through the wire gauze, it was like looking at a picture. How could Venn go on resisting a girl like that, with her young and beautiful body, her adoration of him? What was the story of that - picture, seen from the seclusion of the verandah? Venn didn't kiss her, didn't even touch her. Had he no heart at all? Had the tragedy that had happened in his life years ago killed all tenderness in him, leaving only passion?

It was no use Paddy's trying to understand. She was no more than a stranger who had been thrown amongst these people for a short time. And human relationships - particularly those between a man and a woman - are such complicated things.

When presently Venn came round the verandah and asked after her ankle - and later helped her into the dining-room so that she could eat with the family - she felt an immense gratitude, as if she had been a prisoner all day and was now being offered a reprieve...

She saw Venn again at six o'clock the following morning, when he came unexpectedly to her room. She was barely awake. The pain in her ankle had given her a restless night, and she had wakened much earlier, then slept again. And then she heard a light tap at the door, and Venn's voice asked quietly, "Are you awake, Paddy?"

Her heart leapt. She hardly knew what she expected - for him to say, "There's a truck outside - pack your things - you're off to Gidgeemallawa - good-bye-"

She sat up in the bed in her cotton pyjamas and heard herself say almost aggressively, "Yes - what do you want?"

The door opened and he came in, smiled formally, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Margaret has a baby brother."

It was so unexpected, her mouth fell open and tears rushed to her eyes.

"Oh, super! Oh, she did want it to be a boy! I'm so glad! How is Mrs. Cale?"

"Irene's fine." His eyes were quizzical, thoughtful.

They looked at one another for a moment in silence. Paddy had a sudden longing to say, "I wasn't chasing Keith," but what was the point? She heard herself ask, instead, "How are Annette's poor blistered feet?"

She saw surprise in his eyes, but he said, "Annette's so young she gets over every little thing in a matter of hours."

"Every little thing," repeated Paddy. She thought of that fall from the horse. Well, that wasn't a little thing. According to Annette, he hadn't given her credit for recovering from that so quickly.

"Every little thing... How's the ankle?"

"Fine," said Paddy, who now discovered that just to look at Venn Wildash hurt. There he sat on the edge of her bed, and though they were not talking

about bark canoes, they might as well have been. Or was she wrong? Were his eyes - his voice - after all not so impersonal? She said, slightly confused, "I'll go home today."

"Home?" The dark line of his brows rose, his mouth curved in a sardonic smile.

Paddy coloured, still more flustered. "I meant to Beth's. I don't know why I said home."

He said nothing for a moment, then, dryly, "Could it be that Keith's being there makes it home to you? - home being where the heart is?"

Paddy bit her lip. "It was a slip of the tongue. Do you want me to analyse it?"

"Perhaps not. In any case, you won't go - home. You'll stay here, where you're safer."

Safer here! That was a laugh. With Venn sitting on the edge of her bed! And when once again she was too strongly aware of his magnetism, even at six o'clock in the morning. Her eyes had settled on his and she just didn't want to take them away, despite the odd mixture of interrogation and wariness they encountered there. She was like a bee sipping nectar - she must have her fill.

His eyes looked back at her levelly. Then they moved, they travelled to her lips, to her throat, to her breast that showed rounded through the soft cotton pyjamas. Paddy thought with a tremor, "He was married once - he loved a

girl called Peggy - blonde, pretty, young." When she was killed, had his heart died? Had it been closed to love? Was that what had happened? How could she, a schoolteacher from Gidgeemallawa, a stranger, ever imagine that she could stir that heart to life again - no matter what passion she was able to arouse. Controlled passion, she reminded herself bleakly. It was far more likely that Annette, whom he had known since her childhood, could do that.

Paddy felt her breast rise and fall in a long slow sigh. She wished that Keith had never put that unfair load on to the scales of her mind, for it was there, it affected her emotions and her judgments whether she liked it or not. And ignorance, she reminded herself wryly, can be so much more comfortable...

She wondered what Venn was thinking now as he looked at her that way. Perhaps he was not even thinking of her...

The bed moved slightly as he rose to his feet. "I must get going. I'd like you to stay here till your ankle's really better, Paddy. Okay?"

She nodded, he smiled at her and was gone.

Paddy lay back on her pillow. She thought with remarkable clarity, "I am obsessed by him. Today I shall go back to the Lewises'."

CHAPTER SEVEN

DURING the morning, she went back to the Lewises' bungalow, no matter what Venn had said. Millie brought her breakfast, and when she had eaten it she showered, keeping her weight off her injured foot as much as she could. She had removed the bandage and decided that the swelling was going down nicely. She dressed, and not with any great care, because Venn had gone out anyway and he was the only one who ever commented on her sartorial faults, then packed her gear in the small suitcase Venn had brought over from Beth's.

When she was quite ready she went to look for Agnes, and found her in the kitchen making scones.

Paddy stood in the doorway unsmilingly. "I'm off, Miss Wildash," she said positively. "I came to say thank you for letting me stay and for looking after me."

Agnes, whose hands were covered in dough, looked down at her feet, but as Paddy was wearing jeans, there wasn't anything to see.

"I understood from Venn you were to stay."

"Well, my ankle's okay now, so there's no point, is there?"

"I quite agree," said Miss Wildash unhesitatingly. "All the same, my nephew expects his orders to be obeyed."

Orders? To whom? All he had said to Paddy this morning was "I'd like you to stay'. That was hardly an order, was it? She said firmly, "Don't worry, it's

quite all right for me to leave. I saw him about it this morning. He came to tell me about Margaret's little brother. It's marvellous, isn't it? I wonder what they're going to call him."

Agnes, not drawn by this red herring, looked at her coldly. "Venn knows you're going?"

Paddy nodded. What was a lie or two? Everyone around here seemed to handle the truth according to their own tastes, anyhow. She never had a clue what was true and what was not.

"The fuss you were making last night, coming in to dinner leaning on Venn's arm, I thought we were to have you with us for a week," commented Agnes, returning to her scone dough.

Paddy reddened angrily at her tone. "Well, you won't," she said with forced brightness. "I'll be seeing you, Miss Wildash. Thanks again." And off she went. Every step was agony, but that couldn't be helped. She saw one of the Duncan girls in the garden on her way out and she waved, not knowing whether it was Annette or Jeanne. She wondered what they did with themselves all day, and whether the one in the garden was Annette, keeping herself fresh for Venn. While Jeanne was perhaps out riding. Paddy could ride too, though she hadn't had an opportunity here, so far. In Sydney, before her father had died, she used to go riding with him in Kuring-gai Chase. Venn never asked her, the Sundays he took Margaret and Simon out, whether she would like to come too.

Suitcase in hand, she set off on the long walk to the Lewises'. Actually it was only a few hundred yards, but it was mostly gravel and it seemed like five miles. Paddy began to wonder if her ankle would ever be the same again. It was absurd that she had damaged it so easily. The young get over things very quickly. Maybe she was, not young enough - Annette was only eighteen and a half and Paddy Dempster was twenty-two.

She didn't meet anyone as she went through the garden and across the verandah. Finding her own room - and her bed made up so neatly and coolly - was heaven. She lay there for a long time recovering. And then she forced herself to get up and to go to the back of the house to find Beth and announce herself - Paddy Dempster, just arrived and completely whole.

Beth had started chipping at her stone. She stared as Paddy appeared and looked as if she was seeing things.

"For heaven's sake, sit down before you fall down! What on earth's happened?" She tossed down her chisel and came on to the verandah, and Margaret, playing with Simon in the sand, came running up too.

"Miss Dempster, our baby's a little boy, and Mummy's going to call him Andy. She promised I could choose. And Daddy's coming to see me on Sunday!"

Paddy smiled and kissed Margaret and said it was lovely, and Simon stood by pensively and finally remarked, "Why can't I have a baby brother?"

"I had enough bother producing you," Beth told him. She looked at Paddy quizzically. "Did you walk over here?"

Paddy resisted an absurd temptation to say, "No, I caught a bus." Instead, she nodded. "My foot's not really comfortable," she admitted. "But I wanted to come home."

Beth laughed. "That sounds very very complimentary. All the same, Venn said you were to stay at the homestead till you were better."

Venn said! "I am better - and I didn't want to stay," said Paddy carelessly. "And I promise I shan't be any trouble."

That afternoon while Beth was still deeply engrossed in her sculpture, she succumbed to the pleas of the children and agreed to take them for a picnic. Just as far as the river. Of course it was unwise and she regretted it the minute she had agreed. She walked slowly like a cripple. Margaret was sympathetic and helped her along, and Simon carried the wicker picnic basket, which bumped along the ground beside him. The relief of reaching the river and finding shade was enormous. Paddy, with the weight off her feet, wondered what she was trying to prove. That Venn's orders were unreasonable? That she hadn't told any lies? Or simply - and more likely - that she was out of her mind !

She strictly forbade the children to go in the river; stayed put, and hoped that she hadn't done herself any serious harm. Simon and Margaret played some incomprehensible game with the entire contents of the picnic basket - in

which Paddy simply couldn't get interested. They laid out minute servings of everything - cakes, cookies, bread and butter - as if they were holding a banquet to which a hundred guests had been invited. Simon, It was true, ate more than he set out, while Margaret most meticulously abstained until the right moment.

"Now I'm the princess and I have to eat honeydew and manna, and you must be the Duke of Thralldom and ask: if I want champagne."

Venn's voice said suddenly from above Paddy's head, "You must be one of the most feather-brained schoolteachers that were ever invented, Miss Dempster. Are you trying to earn me the reputation of a brute - turning you out?"

Paddy felt her heart turn over. She looked round at him swiftly. "I didn't tell anyone you'd turned me out."

"Only my aunt."

"Not really. Anyhow, everyone tells lies to your aunt."

"What do you mean by that?"

Paddy shrugged and coloured. "Nothing. She's - she's just so old-fashioned, no one wants to shock her," she improvised.

"What rubbish! She's not old-fashioned and she's not shockable," said Venn. "And I still don't know what you're getting at. Agnes has seen just about everything happen during her lifetime. You're a babe in arms compared with my aunt."

"I am?" said Paddy. "Iniquitous though I am?"

"I've never said you're iniquitous. But you haven't led a completely sheltered life, I shouldn't suppose."

"Wouldn't you?" Paddy flushed and turned away, remembering how she had kissed him. "It depends what you call sheltered. Actually, you don't know the first thing about me, Mr. Wildash. I know more about you than you know about me."

"Do you?" he asked interestedly. He had not joined her where she sat on the ground which she shared with some quite large ants, but stood leaning against a tree - one of his favourite positions, she decided. And it was odd how he leaned against that coolibah - as if it were his friend, his brother; as if they were one. And perhaps they were, for he surely belonged here almost as much as the tree did, and they had been here a long time. Behind him, she could see the Land Rover, and oddly that belonged too..

Paddy eyed that Land Rover with a little feeling of envy. How much easier it would be to travel even the short distance home on four wheels than it would be to cover it on two feet, one of which felt now as if it were practically useless.

Venn's aquamarine eyes were looking down at her oddly. They had observed her many times since she and Venn had first met. They asked questions, they made judgments, and, Paddy supposed, they summed her up. But she didn't know how...

"What do you know about me, Paddy Dempster?" Venn asked.

Paddy looked back at him, a trifle disconcerted. "What do you know about me, Mr. Wildash?"

"It's not to be ladies first? All right." He left his tree and came to lounge comfortable beside her on the ground. "Here goes. You're a schoolteacher. How you came to be that I wouldn't know. And you're an orphan. Of the storm," he added lightly. "A waif with nowhere to go. So people like Beth Lewis and Venn Wildash are sorry for you, in their hearts."

"You're being sarcastic," said Paddy, whose cheeks had flushed. "And I haven't played at being a waif for anyone's benefit. You're certainly not sorry for me anyhow."

"You're quite right." His smile was faintly crooked. "I'm not in the least sorry for you." He screwed up his eyes and pulled at a grass stem. "The one I'm sorry for is the man in Sydney."

Crazily, it needed a mental effort for Paddy to remind herself that he meant Phil, and she was aware of her own blink of surprise.

"Does he know you're playing the field out here?" His eyes were suddenly older, harder, and Paddy felt herself drawn helplessly as into a whirlpool. She was pulled into their depth as if she must drown, submerged in their blueness, their fascination, and for an endless moment she was completely lost. Those eyes, hard, probing, questioning - critical though they might be - did incomprehensible things to her. "My enemy." The words formed themselves of

their own accord, and she felt them soundless on her lips. "My enemy whom I-" It had begun the very first night they had met, when he had driven her back to Gidgeemallawa. She had been baffled then by her reaction to those eyes as they looked into hers in the enclosed privacy of a car in an empty silent night. But now she was baffled no longer. In a blinding flash she knew just what it was those eyes did to her. She knew that were she asked to share Venn Wildash's bed for even a single night, she would say yes.

And how she would hate herself afterwards!

Well, she could comfort herself with the knowledge that it would never be a decision that Paddy Dempster would have to make. Perhaps it had happened to Annette Duncan - she couldn't pretend to know the least little thing about that...

But what had Venn asked her? About Phil - whether he knew she was playing the field -

"Of course he knows," she said, withdrawing her gaze from his and wondering how long he had held it. "Every little thing. About you too," she added unthinkingly.

His eyes narrowed to slits and he raised himself on his elbow. "About me? What's there to know about me?"

Paddy's dark lashes fell. She pushed the hair from her cheek with a nervous hand and turned her head, slightly aware that she had now blushed crimson. What a dotty thing to have said! Why hadn't she the sense to keep him out of

it? She looked over at the children, squatting on the ground, absorbed in their game, and she knew that Venn was waiting relentlessly for her answer. She felt suddenly that she could scarcely breathe. But it was the suffocating quality of the heat -it was nothing to do with the fact that Venn had got her, metaphorically, in a corner.

"That you - kissed me," she said, her voice faint and exasperated.

He was mockingly amused. "And you thought a mere kiss was worth a mention? I shouldn't have thought so."

"I don't expect you would have. But in my-"

"In your chaste circles, you're going to tell me, a kiss is really something," he said cynically. "Well, save yourself the bother. You might as well try to persuade me that you're Alice in Wonderland. Any girl who knocks around with Keith is bound to have her horizons widened," he finished deliberately.

"So your aunt tells me," said Paddy coldly. She found with a kind of relief that she hated him still. That she could look at him and really hate him - despite the sun shining on his hair and turning it to gold, and the lines of strength and ease that were implicit in the way he leaned back on one arm beside her, his long legs in their narrowlegged cord, trousers stretched out crossed negligently - almost elegantly - at the ankles. Yes, she hated him and his utterly unflattering opinion of her.

"Did you need my aunt to tell you?"

"Actually no," said Paddy flippantly. "I worked it out for myself."

There was a second's silence. "Right," he said equably. "I think we'll call it stalemate. Perhaps I don't know so much about you after all. Except that you're in trouble with your ankle. Right?" He smiled, showing those square white teeth: "Now am I to hear a few home truths? Or shall we cancel the tournament?"

It would have been wiser to let the subject go, but Paddy was not always wise. And if she was not above reproach, then neither was he... She said rashly, "If you want home truths - I know that when you claim to be deducing facts, you're often just jumping to conclusions."

Now he was disconcerted. "That sounds decidedly personal, but you can't be referring to my remark about your ankle. So are you implying that I misjudge you? If so, in what way?"

"We're not talking about me," said Paddy uncomfortably. "We're talking about you."

This appeared to amuse him. "So we are. And I don't know that I'm going to relish it. However, it could be illuminating to hear your angle on my character."

"I wouldn't presume to offer you that, Mr. Wildash. I'm hardly well enough clued up about you to have an angle, in any case. All I know, is a few facts. That you're the boss of Bibbenluke station. That - that -" she searched wildly in her mind, feeling more flabbergasted than she liked. - "that Beth and Max Lewis are your friends, that you-" She stopped on the point of saying, That

you are in love with Annette, for the words had come crazily into her mind. "That you were married once," she said more soberly, and looked at him. "That' all."

He was lighting a cigarette and he looked at her over the flame of the match before he shook it out.

"To Peggy," Paddy said suddenly, and there was relief in saying it. "That's her photograph at the homestead, isn't it?" He nodded and drew on his cigarette, and Paddy wished she hadn't mentioned the photograph after all. What did she say now, without making herself sound insufferably curious? "She was very pretty"? How would that do? When what she really wanted to ask was, "Did you love her very much?"

Venn looked at her narrowly through the cigarette smoke, and despite the heat, she felt her face grow pale and paler still. Then he said, exactly as though she had put the question into words. "Yes, that was Peggy. I loved her." He said it simply, matter-of-factly, and left it at that.

Paddy was shocked at her own reaction. She experienced a feeling of the deepest, the most intense jealousy. And what right had she to be jealous of the wife that Venn had loved?

Lower lip caught between her teeth, she looked at him bleakly, and he discarded his barely smoked cigarette, crushed it into the ground with his fist, then raised his eyes to hers.

"My wife was killed some years ago when the small plane she was in crashed out towards our western boundary. She was twenty-two - that's about your age, I would propose. She was pretty, spirited, gay with everything to live for. And she was carrying our child."

He had never talked to her like this before. Paddy was aware of a complete change of tempo, and her voice was low as she said steadily, "I'm - sorry it happened for you - like that."

His long flexible mouth curved slightly, and she saw the edge of those white teeth. "Yes. It was cataclysmic at the time. My father had died the previous year. And as well as my wife, my overseer, Harry, was killed in the plane crash. And Harry's daughter, Laurette, the Duncan girls' mother. It was a very grim experience - to learn so unequivocally, so dramatically, that in a moment the curtain can come down and it's the end of the play. My personal life was blown sky high, and as far as Bibbenluke was concerned, I was out on a limb. I hadn't nearly found my feet managing the place without my father. Having Max Lewis come to work for me was a lifesaver in many ways. I've never ceased to be grateful to him and to Beth - sane, sensible people, true friends at a time when stability and practical help were my greatest needs. As for love - there was no room and no time in my life for love after that. I believed, as the young do, that I'd spent my allowance of love." He smiled faintly and Paddy had the feeling he had forgotten he was talking to her, had forgotten her very existence. "But love is like nothing else in this world. It's

simply not a commodity that you can use up. That's a lesson to be learned... It's - amazing."

Unexpectedly his blue eyes looked up and straight into hers, and Paddy felt as if a shaft had struck her straight through the heart. She knew a deep thankfulness that she was seated on the solid ground with her back against a tree. Because if she had been standing, her legs would have given way. She had made a shattering discovery. Something she could hardly believe, and yet she knew it for the truth. She was in love with Venn Wildash.

"My enemy whom I love." She completed the thought she had not finished some minutes ago. Though of course she had known it for a long time.

Venn was saying quizzically, "Amazing - yet not altogether palatable - when one learns it so late... You're very quiet, Paddy. Thinking of your own tangled love affairs? You're like a kitten chasing its own tail. I don't believe you know what love is, yet."

No, she didn't know. She was just beginning. But she had an idea that for her, love was going to be pain and parting. Venn had learned the pain of love through death. Paddy was to have it easier, but it would still be pain.

She found she had lost all her desire for verbal sparring, with Venn. By enlarging on the facts she had claimed to know about him, he had made her well aware of the limits of her knowledge of him - of the gulf that separated them. And now there was a kind of challenge in his glance. Set me right

about you - tell me why you're chasing after Keith Laidlawe while that other man waits for you in Sydney.

What could she say? Could she tell her sad little story about Phil that was no story at all - and didn't even matter to her any more? Deny yet again that Keith had any fascination for her? Admit, I've fallen in love with you, Mr. Wildash." That would give him the laugh of the year! No, she wasn't going to put out confidences about herself that she would wish later she had kept silent about. She wondered, though, what he had meant when he had said "amazing - but not altogether palatable". That his reason rebelled against the dictates of his heart? Because Annette was so palpably young and immature - so unsuitable - Paddy pulled herself up. That was only the way she saw it. And she was theorizing again...

"Well," Venn had got lazily to his feet, "I'm going to drive around some of the fences before I go home. Want to come for the ride? We might even run into Keith if we're lucky."

What an infuriating thing to say! Paddy opened her mouth to refuse immediately. But the children would enjoy a ride with Uncle Venn, and that way, she wouldn'tt have to walk home. And quite honestly, she didn't think she was capable of walking home.

So she said gaily, careless of what he might think, "Terrific!" And when he turned away to call the children, she got herself upright without letting him

see her grimace of pain. But she had to accept his help over to the Land Rover.

Margaret said excitedly from the back seat, as they started off, "Daddy's coming to see me on Sunday, Uncle Venn."

"That's wonderful."

Paddy held her breath and waited for him to say, "You'll be able to go back with him, Paddy Dempster." But he didn't say it. Instead, he told Paddy, ".You'd better make up your mind to rest up that foot of yours between now and Sunday. I don't want any tales of my brutality being carried back to Gidgeemallawa. I'm responsible for you, you know, seeing I refused to inquire around the district and thus possibly gratify your desire to leave."

Her desire to leave. Her non-existent desire. Passed on so glibly and positively by Miss Wildash. It certainly appeared as if everyone were playing around with the truth.

They saw the new mob of sheep that Venn had bought to fatten up and sell, feeding on the good green grass by the river. And they - or at least Venn - found a break in the fencing somewhere. Venn was angry about that break.

"Keith should have picked it up yesterday - or today at the latest. It should have been mended by now. Probably done by a 'roo." He left Paddy and Margaret in the Land-Rover while, accompanied by Simon, he made temporary repairs to the damage.

"Uncle Keith will fix it tomorrow," Margaret confided to Paddy. She was a little distressed. She whispered fearfully, "He took Annette for a picnic today - he does sometimes. I heard them planning it. Don't tell Uncle Venn, will you - or Auntie Beth? Because I shouldn't have listened, because I was down low cleaning my shoes and Simon's, and I couldn't help hearing."

"I shan't tell," comforted Paddy. She felt sickened to hear this confidence about Annette and wondered if Venn knew too - and if that were part of the reason why he found love unpalatable. Keith should have more discretion, she thought, particularly if he was really interested in that "unblemished year" on Bibbenluke. Frankly, no matter what Beth hoped, she didn't think he was.

After Venn and Simon came back to the car, they turned towards home in evening light that was softening and losing its fierce heat. Venn drove slowly and looked around him reflectively, and presently said meditatively, "It's a cruel country, at times. This season you see it in a more mellow mood, though lately the heat has been pitiless. Do you feel it that way, Paddy? Or are you too young to find climate or weather destructive?"

Paddy said, "I'm not as young as all that. It's certainly been hot. But I can bear it."

"That's good," said Venn. "Then perhaps you can see the cruelty more as a kind of indifference. The unvindictive indifference of nature. One comes to love the land the same way as one loves nature - with a love that's a wild infatuation when she's benevolent, and, oddly, is a kind of totally involved

hatred that's almost a personal identification when she has nothing to give. How love can be both hate and love at one and the same time, I don't know, yet it's so."

"Yes, it's so," thought Paddy soberly. Just now to say that she was wildly infatuated by Venn was an understatement. Yet in a minute or a day, she might find herself burning with hatred at his injustice, or his coldness... She murmured, "Yes, I can understand that."

"You can?" He didn't sound at all convinced, and he added irrelevantly, "I'm sorry you didn't have any luck with Keith this evening."

Paddy bit back an impatient exclamation, and was pleased to be able to transfer her attention to Margaret, who was exclaiming, "Oh, look at all those lovely flowers. Simon. It's like a garden!"

Paddy looked ahead, and so did Venn. Lit by the slanting sultry rays of the sun, a great patch of mauvish-pink flowers was spread over the ground. Their petals were beginning to curl inwards as their lifegiver, the sun, moved down the sky. The flowers glistened like silk in the hot golden light, their fleshy leaves glowed translucently, and the whole scene dazzled the eye like a pointillist painting. A couple of pipits ran rapidly across the ground in search of grasshoppers, to rise into the air with alarmed cries as the Land-Rover came closer.

"What are they?" Paddy asked Venn. Their prettiness against the drying grasses was so unexpected and so ephemeral.

"They're noonflowers." Venn sent her a quizzical glance. "Are you a nature-lover? They'll be gone soon, now the hot weather's settled on us."

Paddy stared bemused. It was as if Venn had said, "You too will soon be gone." Brave noonflowers, spreading their petals to their god the sun - to receive his burning blessing, and eventually to be destroyed by him. "My sun," thought Paddy, "is the boss of Bibbenluke." And his blessing too was a doubtful one...

"You'd better come back to the homestead," Venn said presently, when the station buildings had come into sight.

"I'd rather stay with Beth," she said quickly, defensively. "I'll rest my ankle-"

"Is that a promise?" Venn looked in the rear vision mirror at the two children behind. "What about you two kids? Will you see that Paddy rests her foot up?"

"Miss Dempster," Margaret corrected a little primly. "I promise to look after her. I can do Simon's shoes up-"

"I can do them myself, Margaret," protested Simon. "But I can't do that thing with your hair."

"Plait it," said Margaret.

Venn said on a laugh, "Miss Dempster can plait Margaret's hair, son. It's only her foot that's out of commission."

He had pulled up near the Lewises' gate to let Paddy and the children out when two horses cantered up from behind the trees that sheltered the fence.

Two horses and with them a dog. The dog was Keith's black kelpie, Trixie, her tongue lolling, her sides heaving gently. Annette and Keith rode the horses, and both of them looked a little taken aback at the sight of the Land-Rover.

Then Annette tossed her fair hair back and moved forward again. "Hi, Venn," she said brightly. "Keith and I are going out for a ride."

Paddy was aware of Margaret sending her a sidelong glance, and of her scandalized whisper, "Oh, that's a fib, Miss Dempster!"

Paddy pretended not to hear.

Venn said briskly, "You can change your mind, then. There's a break in the fence in the south-west corner of the leopardwood paddock, Keith. Get out and mend it. And take a lamp. You'll be working in the dark."

"Okay, boss," said Keith laconically.

"Aunt Agnes doesn't like me to ride by myself," said Annette with a pout. "Will you come with me, Venn?"

"No, I shan't, Annette," Venn said coolly but pleasantly "I'll see you on the verandah in twenty minutes, however. See that you're there." He had scarcely looked at her, and Paddy was aware of his displeasure. She didn't think he believed the story Annette had told any more than Margaret did. Annette was in for a row.

Venn said nothing at all as he helped Paddy out of the car. He didn't even look to see if the other two had moved off - but of course they had. Despite herself, Paddy needed his help - though not to the extent of having him lift

her bodily and carry her through the garden, which he did. But that was mere expediency, she thought, uncomfortably. It was to save wasting time on her. Once on the verandah, he let her slip to the ground, where she stood adjusting her balance, his arm still around her in the near dark.

"Vera!"

The aboriginal was there in three seconds, barefooted and smiling. "What you want, Venn?"

"Find a walking stick for Paddy, here. Her foot's crook. And see you bring her breakfast in bed in the morning. Now mind, Paddy - I expect you to be all in one piece on Sunday." He disappeared rapidly into the darkening garden, to take his shower and to see Annette on the verandah. What would happen then? Sparks would surely fly! Paddy suddenly remembered his saying, "Put two passions together and there's a conflagration" . .

She had a tete-a-tete with Keith that night whether she wanted it or not. Beth had insisted she go to bed early after dinner, and she had barely settled herself under the sheet with a book when Keith appeared, having at last returned from the work he had been sent to do.

"So you've come back to us, have you, Paddy? I thought you'd shifted camp and gone to join the harem permanently. How's the ankle?"

"Not bad and not good," said Paddy briefly, and added unkindly, "It's a pity you and Annette had to miss your ride."

He gave her a sharp look. "Who's been telling tales? And isn't it Annette's affair what she does with her time? She's as bored as I am. The fences will always keep."

"Will they? I had the idea they could mean days of mustering work undone - losses even. The same as if you left a gate open." She lay back on the pillows, the sheet pulled up to her shoulders, looking at Keith thoughtfully - the good-looking face, the thick curly hair, almost as dark as her own, the greenish hazel eyes that had the fire of insolence in them. "Don't you want to put in an unblemished year here, Keith?" she asked curiously. "And doesn't it matter to you that Annette's Venn's girl?"

He stared at her for -a moment, then shrugged. "If Venn wants a girl for himself he should earmark her, so we all ,know. What's more, he should wake up to the fact that if he's not going to satisfy her need for love then someone else will. She's a sexy little bird, is Annette. She's spot pure and virtuous like you, Miss Dempster... And have you and my sister been having a heart-to-heart chat about me, by any chance?"

"No," said Paddy. "But it would be hard not to have picked up the fact that you're on Bibbenluke to mend your ways."

"Really? How cosy! So you see me as the prodigal repenting, do you?" Suddenly he began to pace restlessly around the room. • "For your information, I could find plenty of unapproved ways of amusing myself here if I wanted - quite apart from giving Annette a bit of a kick now and again.

You know what occurred to me today, when I took Annette out?" He stopped and stood facing her, a curious smile on his lips. "There's a little grass trap out there that would be just the place to hide a few sheep. Cut a few wires in a strategic place, convince everyone it's an outside job, and then more or less at leisure, find a buyer. I've still got contacts - I wouldn't have the slightest trouble selling some nice fat lambs. I mightn't get the price Venn would, but then I haven't laid out any money, have I?" He grinned suddenly, and Paddy wondered if he were serious or not.

"I think you're crazy," she said uncertainly.

"Sure I am, but don't worry, Paddy love, I'm only pulling your leg. It amuses me to think up inventive little schemes like that, that's all."

"Some sheep were stolen about the time I came here, weren't they?" Paddy remembered. "That was an outside job." As she spoke, she remembered Max saying that Venn hadn't been altogether satisfied with what the aboriginal tracker had been able to find out.

"Too right it was," Keith agreed easily. "So you see-" Beth had just come into the room and he gave her a lazily affectionate grin. "We're talking about cutting wires and stealing sheep, Betsy. Paddy has it in mind that I've been on the rampage."

A quick frown crossed Beth's small brown face, and Paddy felt a flash of quite positive dislike for Keith. She thought, "He's the serpent in the garden. Venn should never have let him come here." She thought fleetingly of Dorian

Gray - the outer charm, the rotten, dissolute interior. No wonder Agnes Wildash didn't want the girls mixed up with him. Her ankle was suddenly aching intolerably, and she closed her eyes.

Beth said, "I don't know what you're working up to, Keith, but I wish you'd remember that every time you slip up it reflects back on Max. Like today. Venn knows very well you didn't go round those fences. Yet Max asked you-"

"Betsy, that fence is now as good as new," said Keith. "So why don't you just go on minding your own business? Get on with your little bit of sculpting and let me conduct my own life."

"You'll be conducting it somewhere else, pretty soon," said Beth sharply. "And now let's get out of here - Paddy doesn't want to listen to a family row."

Paddy kept her eyes closed till they had gone. And then, though she tried to return to her book, she found she couldn't concentrate. Her mind strayed back continually to the people who lived on Bibbenluke, whether it was permanently or temporarily, and finally her thoughts settled on Venn, and on the uncomfortable and impossible fact that she had fallen in love with him.

Her ankle was far from a hundred per cent the next day. She had done it no good at all by walking about on it, and it was no wonder Venn thought her foolish. She had her breakfast in bed and then hobbled out to sit in the shade and write letters. It was time she wrote again to Norma, her stepmother, but after managing half a page or so, she gave it up. It seemed she had too much to hide, and her heart was too restless.

And it was far too hot.

It was the usual uneventful day, and Paddy realized very clearly that Vera and Beth could look after the children without her help. Beth's migraines had never eventuated and had surely been invented to make her feel more comfortable. Margaret, excited though she was over the arrival of her baby brother, and with her father's visit to look forward to, continued to be easily manageable. It was no wonder, Paddy reflected, sitting idly in the shade, her foot resting on a canvas stool that Vera had produced, that Venn had considered her advent suspect, and still more than half believed she was here on Keith's account.

She was surprised when Annette came to find her in the garden late in the afternoon, and to sit on the grass and ask about her foot. Paddy made a conventional reply and then remarked frankly, "That was pretty cool of you, Annette, to tell Miss Wildash I'd persuaded you to take me to look for Keith the other day. Why on earth did you do it?"

Annette's round toffee-coloured eyes looked back at her - blank, unrevealing, empty of expression, and completely baffling. What sort of a girl was Annette?

"Oh, well. Aunt Agrees just sort of - jumped to the conclusion. So I let her," she said. "I mean, what was the point in letting her think it was my idea? Because she does scold, you know, and it's a great big bore."

Paddy looked at her, puzzled. Surely she was too old to be talking about being scolded!

"But you were looking for Venn! What was wrong with telling the truth - even if she doesn't like you driving around?"

"I made a mistake," said Annette after a moment. She picked up a twig and drew a circle on the grass and put a very final dot in the middle of it. "Venn hadn't gone out that way after all, so it would have sounded kind of funny."

Paddy couldn't make it out. And since at that moment Keith came into the garden no more was said. Annette, who was wearing a long dress of creamy cotton with a frill at the hem and a tightly fitting bodice that showed the curve of her bosom, jumped up and ran over to him and they walked away together. Presumably to exchange stories of what Venn had had to say to each of them last night, Paddy thought. She would not have been surprised to hear that Keith had been given his marching orders.

As for Annette, that girl was asking for trouble. Maybe she always had. Paddy couldn't for the life of her imagine her as Venn Wildash's wife.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NOTHING spectacular happened during the next few days except that Paddy's ankle recovered, and then it was Sunday. Bruce Cale had arrived late the previous night, and Margaret was very excited. A picnic was planned to the river - the only possible place to go in the heat that still continued. Well, there was safety in numbers, thought Paddy, as she prepared to go along too. She had brushed Margaret's shining red hair and plaited it while listening to the child's excited chatter about her baby brother.

"His eyes are blue and he's got a little tuft of hair just the colour of mine. Mummy will bring him home in two weeks and that's when I'm going home too. Isn't it exciting, Miss Dempster? Of course I'll miss Starlight and the riding and Simon and Uncle Venn, but-"

Paddy scarcely heard what she said next. Her heart stood still for the fraction of a second. In two weeks she would go too. And she would miss all this - and Uncle Venn -

She looked in the mirror, and over Margaret's small freckled face she caught her own glance, wistful, sad, and she pushed the dark silky hair from her cheek. Well, would it have made any difference to have been a blonde? she asked herself almost comically.

Surprisingly, Bruce Cale had brought some mail for Paddy. It had been addressed to Mrs. Frank's and had somehow missed out on being sent on to Bibbenluke. A couple of letters from friends, and a letter from Phil. A parcel,

too! Paddy's eyes widened. She was ready for the picnic and she had been hunted away from the kitchen by Beth, who told her, "Vera and I have everything under control, Paddy. You go and read your mail - open your parcel."

So Paddy sat on the verandah and did as she was told. For some reason, she left Phil's letter till last. Once her feverish fingers would have ripped it open first of all, but now the sight of that handwriting didn't upset the regular beat of her heart at all. And if the letter was to tell her when he and Diana were being married, or to ask if Paddy would like to be bridesmaid - well, she could take it without any trouble at all. Perhaps she'd even agree to be bridesmaid. Who knew? If the best man was presentable, she told herself without premeditated bitterness, she might even be able to work up a new love interest, to get her over the one that had never got off the ground during her sojourn in the outback.

But the letter, when she finally did get around to opening it, was a complete surprise. Her eyes scanned it rapidly, her brow furrowed. She made a small impatient grimace. It was all so ridiculous! So short a time ago, this letter would have started her heart beating again, because Phil claimed now that he and Diana had decided they had made a mistake. It was all off.

"You're the girl I love best, Paddy. Are you still staying on that sheep station? I hope you haven't got yourself embroiled with that rich squatter you

threw in my face! What about packing a bag and jumping on the next train and coming home? I promise to meet you at Central."

Paddy finished reading the letter quickly. There would be no jumping on the next train. As for the squatter, she had got herself embroiled with him all right, but not quite in the way that Phil half-jokingly feared. But that she would keep to herself. It was a pity about Diana, she found herself thinking as she rather absentmindedly slipped the string off her package, because Diana was a nice girl - and Phil was a nice guy. The very idea of their romance seemed so simple and uncomplicated that she was filled with regret it hadn't worked to a nice tidy conclusion. So obviously it wasn't simple and uncomplicated, and the fact appeared to be that love very seldom was. Every love affair had its own pattern of misunderstanding or mishap or tragedy, before it had even a chance of coming right. And often, it went irrevocably wrong.

Maybe Phil and Diana would come together again yet. She would write to Phil to that effect, because really they were well suited to one another. The thought was a somewhat absurd one when she recalled her feeling when she had first heard about it.

She discovered that she had pulled from its pale blue tissue paper a very lovely negligee. It was pure silk and it was the most elegant thing she had ever seen, in the palest of pale eau-de-nil colour. With it was one of those large noteboards, that are cute rather than beautiful, picturing a bush of red

roses and a small boy and small girl whose lips were touching. On the back of it Phil had written sentimentally, "Red roses are for love, and so is the kiss. Please come home. I love you. Phil."

Someone came round the verandah and Paddy turned her head sharply. It was Venn Wildash, of course, his quizzical look on the silken negligee and the lavish and large card.

"A late Christmas present? Or is it your birthday?" he asked, too interestedly.

To her annoyance, Paddy felt herself blush scarlet. What sort of an answer could she make to a question like that - so casual and open? Next thing, he'd want to know who it was from, and she could hardly say it was a gift from a non-existent godmother. Only one kind of person would send a card like that...

She said flusteredly, bundling the negligee haphazardly back into its wrappings, "It's a - a Christmas present." The card fluttered to the floor and lay face up, with Phil's message and his large scribbled signature all too plain.

Venn stooped and picked it up. He read it before he handed it back to her, of course. He didn't even pretend not to. Well, thought Paddy as she thrust it out of sight, Phil could be a girl. But Phil was definitely not a girl, with a message like that. Her cheeks flushed even more deeply and through her lashes she saw the mocking fire in his blue eyes.

Her man in Sydney. That was what he was thinking. And why, after all, should she care?

"Well, you'll soon be home, Miss Dempster," he remarked, and moved off without another word.

Not home, thought Paddy when he had gone. She didn't have a home. But gone. Yes, in two weeks' time she would be gone. Not before that. She didn't think any more that Venn would suggest she should go with Bruce - though his aunt might! No, somehow she knew in her bones that Venn wouldn't do that. Because everything had shifted focus slightly in the last little while. Even before he had told her about Peggy, he had been observing her. She wasn't sure when she had become aware of it, and she didn't know why he was doing it, but because of it, she knew he was going to let her stay her limited time out.

And of course she wanted to stay. However bad it was afterwards when she had gone.

Everyone went to the picnic by the river. They talked, they lunched, they rested, they swam. They drank cool drinks continually, and the hot sleepy day went by like a dream, like something unreal. Annette sauntered about seductively in her bikini, offering overflowing glasses of iced beer to the menfolk, and, watching her, Paddy thought she might almost as well have been stark naked. She wondered how she had ever confused the two sisters. Annette was always so deliberately provocative, while Jeanne seemed almost

decorous even in her bikini - and while they were eating she put on a long skirt of pretty patchwork cotton.

Paddy had managed - quite skilfully, she thought - to avoid being cornered by either Venn or Keith. But that could have been because they were both a little preoccupied watching Annette. However, she was not to go scot-free for the whole of the day.

It was just after darkness had fallen, a small fire had been lit in a roughly built fireplace, and the Billy had been put on to boil, that Bruce said with a friendly smile at Paddy, "I hope that was a pleasing gift I brought out from Gidgeemallawa, Miss Dempster."

"Very pleasing, thank you," said Paddy, smiling back and saying merely something conventional. But Venn picked it up, and she glanced across at him knowing that he had listened, and sure enough there was a mockin speculation in his scrutiny, and she coloured.. So what was it to do with Venn Wildash if she found a pale green silk gown a pleasing gift from a man?

He got up and strolled casually over to her, offered her a cigarette, which she refused, then settled down on the grass a little away from her, just near enough to conduct a very private conversation in a low and casual tone.

"It was certainly a lavish gift," he said chattily. His eyes looked slightly devilish, reflecting the red flickering firelight. "Silk, wasn't it? I wonder what sort of a man he is to send you something as personal - as intimate - as that."

"For all you know," said Paddy with an attempt at sophisticated coolness, "he might be a man old enough to be my father."

"That's in the cards too," he agreed consideringly. "But hardly with a paternal angle on you, judging from the message - as well as the gift. Or are you so young that doesn't seem obvious?"

"No, I'm not so young," said Paddy. It annoyed her that he was continually drawing attention to her age. "I'm older than Jeanne and Annette," she added pointlessly.

"In years," he agreed. "But in experience? You continue to baffle me there, Paddy Dempster. You don't give a thing away about yourself, do you, unless it's inadvertent. You know, when you came here, I thought I knew the hell of a lot about you - I had you nicely summed up - but I've since reached the conclusion that I have to start again. And you have a very tricky way of evading the issue even when I dress my wolfish questions up as lambs."

A little amused, Paddy looked at him through her lashes. The questions I'd like to ask you, she thought. But of course she couldn't. And this was where the whole idea of communication seemed to break down - there are so many conventional tabus in the adult world. It was a wonder people ever got to know each other, and perhaps most of them never really did... For instance, how did this situation come about? Here she was - incomprehensibly - engaged in a very private conversation with Venn while Annette - yes, while Annette, dressed now in that revealing long cream cotton dress of hers, was

leaning back against a tree trunk beside Keith. And her fingers were playing almost obsessively with the paua shell tiki someone had sent her at Christmas time. And Venn was taking not the least bit of notice. Though for sure Agnes was, because even as Paddy looked across at those other two, she shifted her canvas chair next to them, and, by the look of things, took over the conversation.

Paddy looked back at Venn. Their eyes locked, and instantly she was unnerved. She said idiotically, "Well, never mind, I'll soon be out of your hair."

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Venn repeated, "Out of my hair? In Gidgeemallawa? Or - home - back in Sydney?"

"That depends," said Paddy. And didn't add, "On the Education Department."

"More evasions," said Venn. "You're on the defensive when I talk to you."

"Why wouldn't I be?" she challenged. "I know what you think of me."

He shook his head. "You might well be surprised. I've admitted my first assessment was wide of the mark."

"Am I supposed to be grateful for that?"

He made a wry face. "Is that how it sounded? No, you don't need to be grateful." He added, "I'm still curious about your own impressions."

"Of you?" Paddy widened her grey eyes and hoped he couldn't see her deep flush. "Oh, they've undergone various changes-"

"The latest one?"

"I'm still working on it."

"I'm flattered you have the time. I'd have thought you'd be too busy between entertaining Keith and keeping - Phil, isn't it? - in a state of hopeful anticipation."

"Is that how you interpret my mail?" she asked dryly.

"That's how I interpret it," he said, not at all abashed. "I marvel at you, Paddy Dempster. My great regret is that you must leave us, for I gather you will. I can't believe you think you have anything permanent to gain from Keith."

Paddy almost said, "He's too occupied with Annette for me to think that, isn't he?" Instead she remarked, "It astonishes me that you have him working here, the way you feel about him. Is it to please Beth?"

He shrugged. "Partly. There are other reasons too."

"Well, I've heard it said the influence of a woman can be the making of a man. A good woman could be just what Keith Laidlaw needs."

"Are you serious?" he asked - sharply, roughly, so that Paddy flinched and her spine prickled.

"How can you ask?" she said evasively.

"How can I?" he said violently. "One minute you're rhapsodizing over some silk thing a man's sent you from Sydney, the next you're talking about being the good influence on Keith Laidlaw's life."

"Maybe I'd better stick to schoolteaching." Paddy got up from the ground slowly. "Which reminds me, Margaret looks as if she's falling asleep on her father's lap and Simon's on the ground. She drifted away, and hated doing it, because she could have stayed there for ever, watching his eyes in the firelight, the curve of his mouth, the flash of his white teeth. Listening to his voice, no matter what it was saying, even if he was abusing her.

He got up almost as soon as she did and went to join his aunt and those other two, and Paddy took Simon on her knee and he clung to her and nuzzled her neck like a little koala, while Beth, a cigarette in one hand, continued to talk to Max and Bruce completely unaware.

And Jeanne sat dreamingly alone, waiting for the billy to boil.

Nothing seemed quite the same after the picnic, after Bruce had gone. "So soon," Paddy thought, "I'll be gone too." And she longed for something definite to happen. Anything.

But nothing happened. Yet it was the lull before the storm, some sixth sense told her.

One afternoon when both the children, worn out, were sleeping and even Beth had abandoned her sculpture and fallen asleep on the verandah, Paddy went down to the saddling yard and asked Jim to saddle up a pony for her. She rode away from the homestead knowing that deep in her mind she hoped to encounter Venn. It was great to be riding about Bibbenluke. She had become obsessed with the place at some hidden level of her subconscious

mind. It was burningly hot, and yet she accepted that; and she accepted the shimmering landscape that was rapidly drying up and assuming tones of tarnished gold, silver grey, soft muted ochre. It was impossible to imagine herself back in Gidgeemallawa teaching school again while out here Venn Wildash still drove or rode about and worked out his destiny without her. She had the feeling that Jeanne Duncan would go - that perhaps she had a boyfriend in Sydney - but of Annette she tried not to think, though it was impossible. Annette had emerged as a girl who had tasted the apple, and could never go back to innocence.

"And nor can I, in a curious way," thought Paddy as her horse jogged along while she sat passive, nerveless, almost as though she had left her body and retreated to the spirit. It struck her as strange that Annette, who professed to be madly in love with Venn, could still bear Keith's lips against hers, the touch of his hands on her bare flesh. That, to Paddy, was intolerable...

How ironic it was that she had come here to get over her love affair with Phil and had been flung into an emotional experience from which she felt she would never recover, never in her life. Her love affair with Phil had been of the most elementary and childish kind, and her wound had been no more than skin deep.

"I will stay here near Venn until I must go."

She had actually said the words aloud from the depths of her reverie, and the sound of them brought her abruptly back into her physical being, into the present moment.

Ahead of her across the expanse of long yellowing grasses was a low line of mountains, as flimsy looking as a bit of crumpled tissue paper, their colour the pale tarnished gold of a skeleton leaf. The sky behind was gauzy with blown dust, the red dust of the western plains. Paddy had never been so close to those elusive mountains that appeared and disappeared in their haze of dust, their reality never to be quite accepted though the heart hungered for them as a relief from the monotonous plains. She knew she must have come a long way while she had been deep in her bewildered dream, and she realized later that she should have turned back then, for the afternoon had already been half over when she left the bungalow. Yet she rode on towards the hills as if under some compulsion. A light wind blew across the long grasses and they rippled and surged like yellow waters flowing, and suddenly her mount broke into a canter, and off they went along the narrow track.

Finally she had to pull him up, for there was a fence crossing the track, and the inevitable gate that must be opened and meticulously closed. Had she opened and closed other gates without even being aware of it? she wondered, for surely she could not have come all this way without encountering a fence. It was true that out here, some of the paddocks were enormous, and could cover as much as four thousand acres, though she knew from hearing Max

talk that it was Venn's policy to divide his property into paddocks small enough to create a more even grazing pattern, and thus lessen the likelihood of erosion.

But perhaps she was no longer even on Bibbenluke land !

Through the gate, she was on rockier terrain, and the ground tilted unevenly towards a low hill that had been hidden before by the brimming field of surging grasses. Her horse picked its way through stones, and there were wild flowers growing - the brilliant red of Sturt's desert pea, the blue of Patterson's curse. Paddy saw now that she would never reach her mountains, but this hill she had discovered - it was topped by a jagged line of rocks like a spine.

And with a suddenness that was almost magical everything seemed to have changed. Paddy felt she had crossed an invisible boundary into another world - a still world where the setting sun blazed straight into her eyes. Shafts of red light slashed through a smudge of dust to paint purple shadows and theatrical bands of brilliant vermilion amongst the boulders and the prickly-leaved plant that dotted the ground. "Where am I?" Paddy felt like a traveller in a strange and fabled land, it was all so empty. Not a human being or a beast in sight, though she thought she heard the bellowing of a bull somewhere.

Or was it the roaring echo of some trapped wind as it blew through a hidden cavern?

The light softened as she reached the long shadow of the hill, and suddenly her horse fidgeted, whinnied, pulled up and stiffened its forelegs. There was a cleft in the hill and Paddy wanted to investigate. Deep in her mind she knew that she hoped to find a homestead there, because soon it would be dark, and she didn't really know how she was going to get home. And she hadn't even told Beth she was going riding.

A homestead, or an outstation - or even a boundary rider's hut, Paddy thought, trying to urge her horse on. But he refused to go, and when he started to pigroot, she dismounted in a fright.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked, when he would not even be led. She tied his reins over the branch of a tree and continued on foot till she reached the cleft. She found herself on a narrow path with sides so steep they seemed to have been cut out of solid rock - a long while ago, for now they were rough and pitted, and hardy-looking plants had taken a foothold everywhere, and bushes with stiff grey branches and prickly leave, reached crazily down. It was very still and quiet, but high overhead the wind was blowing, and she saw a wedgetail eagle taking a ride. Down here it was still and strangely cool: She felt a breath of icy air touch her cheek. Air or-" It edged past her almost tangibly, touching her neck like the cold blade of a knife, so that she shivered suddenly. Still air and yet this - presence moving past her while she floated down the chasm like a leaf being drawn by an opposite current.

No hut or homestead. No building at all. But a small, roughly circular lake, was the word that swam into her mind. For the billowing ground was covered with short soft green grass, and it was all cool shadows, while all around gaped shallow rocky caverns. Sheep had been here at some time. She could see their droppings, but now nothing moved but herself. High above, the sky was flushed to red and the air was flowing as if to drain all the colour away. When it was empty it would be dark, and the thought, of blackness, utter darkness, was frightening.

Paddy walked quickly back to the narrow exit, and right beside it in a ten-foot-high cave that yawned like a wide mouth, she saw hands, and her heart stood still. A score or so of hands, human size. Pale ghostly hands on a smooth curve of rock. They hung there like pallid bats in the deepening shadows of the cave.

Paddy almost screamed. With thudding heart she fled down the narrow passageway into a landscape that was no longer the one she had left behind her. To find there was no horse waiting for her, tethered to a tree...

She stood and stared. She couldn't possibly have come out any other way than she had gone in. Or could she? But this landscape - it was violet-grey with shadows like water ripples running across it. The last drop of colour had drained out of the sky, and it was a pale distant indigo. Something on the ground shone pale steely indigo too. She stooped and touched it. Metal. She drew back quickly. She knew intuitively that it was part of the plane that

had been wrecked here years ago. Her heart was hammering as she moved quickly away, and suddenly she saw the tree to which she had tethered her horse, black and tilted like a Japanese print. The banch was broken and her horse had gone - because she was afraid.

But Paddy Dempster was not afraid, she told herself firmly. Only a little, of the dark that was coming so quickly it was like witchcraft. She whistled to her horse as she had heard the men doing, but hers was an eerie piping lonesome whistle. She listened for the answering whinney, for the thud of hoofbeats. Nothing. Not a sound. And when she tried to whistle again, no sound came. She stood perfectly still and tried to relax. She would have to spend the night out here. So what was there to be frightened of? Someone would come to look for her - she would be found. Tomorrow. She couldn't expect to be found tonight.

There was only one possible place to spend the night, and that was in the little green valley where it was sheltered and the ground was soft. So Paddy groped her way back to her lake of green grass and found a place in the shelter of an overhanging rock where it was flat and where she could curl up and try to persuade herself that she was comfortable. She didn't look at the white hand, and she didn't think about them. She watched the stars come into the sky and she didn't listen to the silence or stare into the shadows where she might imagine she saw something move. She started at the cry of a mopoke, but it was only the cry of an owl, it was nothing supernatural.

After a long while she lay down on her back, her arm under her head, and closed her eyes and thought determinedly - determinedly - of pleasant things.

She thought of things that had given her pleasure - of watching an eagle riding on the wind, of the movement of the long grasses as they surged and retreated like a tide, of the sun shining on her horse's flanks. And she thought of Venn Wildash's blue eyes and the blackness of his level brows, and the near-gold of his shining thick hair. And of how heavenly it would be when he came and found her - as of course he would. And somewhere along the line she fell asleep.

And she dreamt - she dreamt that a little flock of fat lambs came gambolling into her green valley. She heard their soft bleating and the short sharp barking of a dog, that she somehow knew was Trixie, Keith's kelpie. The sheep came jumbling and tumbling in through the narrow steep-sided passageway from outside and spread out gently over the grass while the dog circled them and ran back and forth, and the little mob grew, small feet pattering. Tall black shadows merged with the darkness of the shadowy caves, and Paddy, who knew in her dream, and was disturbed by the knowledge, that it was Keith on horseback herding the sheep in here, saw suddenly with amazement that she was wrong. It was a girl who rode the tall horse in the shadows. A girl with hair that gleamed silver in the starlight, a girl whose face was shadowed by the wide brim of a stockman's hat.

Paddy's disturbance subsided. She really was dreaming. "I'm glad," she thought, "that it's not true - that it's not Keith. Beth would be so unhappy..."

Her sleep deepened, it became one of the those sleeps where the utterly weary relaxed body loses all sensation.

It was a lifetime later that something dragged her from the bottomless pit of unconsciousness, and with madly beating heart, wondering where on earth she was and what had wakened her, she struggled to her feet, conscious of coldness, of stiffness, her body all aches from the hard ground.

There was a sea of sheep in the little valley, and watching over them a man on horseback. Her dream came back and she knew that it was no dream. The only part that had been a dream was when she thought she saw Annette. Because it was a man after all, and of course it was Keith.

Paddy wished futilely that she had not been so silly as to get herself stranded out here. She didn't want to know about Keith - to be mixed up in whatever he was doing. But she would have to make her presence known, because she had to get back to Bibbenluke, and she didn't want search parties out. Well, she would insist that Keith take those sheep back where he had got them - she was not afraid of him. He was not going to get away with selling Venn's fat lambs.

Eyes bright, she began to move towards him, and in the starlight she saw that the rider was walking his horse quietly in her direction. She could see

clearly the silhouette of his bare head and - oh God, it was Venn! Paddy's head began to spin. So her dream - had it been Annette?

And then she cared nothing about anything, because Venn had slipped from the saddle and she had gone straight into his arms and her voice was crying, low and soft, "Oh, Venn - Venn, kiss me - hold me-"

"I'll kiss you later," he breathed in her ear. "I'll kiss the life out of you if you want. But now - are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, pulling herself together, ashamed already that she had asked for his kisses, for his arms. She pulled away from him, aware again of the unbearable aches in her cramped body. "How did you find me? Were you looking for those sheep?"

"The sheep? Damn the sheep. I was looking for you. You can't think that your absence went unremarked," he said tersely. "I've been out half the night - as soon as Beth called me. I found your horse out there and saw the broken branch where I presume you'd tethered it. My God, I thought you'd finished yourself off this time. Out there's a place where tragedy's already happened once at Bibbenluke. I've been here only once in my life and I never even knew this valley existed. Tonight I had the feeling I must come back - and I was right." He stopped for a moment and then asked abruptly, "Did you bring those sheep in here?"

"Of course not!" she exclaimed.

"Then who did?" His eyes stared down into her face and there were steely fires glittering in them.

"I - I don't know."

"I think you do," he said.

Paddy shook her head. "I was asleep - I was dreaming -"

"Sweetheart, you didn't lie here asleep while all that happened around you. If those sheep weren't here when you came in - and I presume they weren't or you'd have said so - then you woke when you heard the patter of their tiny feet. That's logic." He paused and took hold of her by the upper arms. Her arms were cold and his hand were warm, and yet she shivered. "It was Keith, wasn't it?"

Paddy shook her head dumbly. To say it was Annette wouldn't make sense, yet to allow him to believe it had been Keith was equally unthinkable. Because it hadn't been. She felt quite certain about that. Her dream had been no dream, and she had seen blonde hair, a girl's slim figure. Annette or Jeanne - what odds were there?

"It wasn't Keith," she said, and added confusedly, "I was asleep."

He looked at her in silence, and then said mockingly, "You were asleep. But it wasn't Keith. What a story! So unconvincing as to be worthless. So we'll forget the whole thing, we won't talk about it. I'll draw my own conclusions."

"It wasn't Keith," said Paddy stubbornly. She didn't like Keith, but she didn't want to see him blamed for some prank of Annette's. After all, he was Beth's

brother. She turned away and stretched her arms achingly, then ran her fingers through her hair. It was wonderful to have been found, to be safe again. She felt deeply troubled about the sheep, but she was glad they weren't going to talk about that any more just now. It would all be sorted out somehow, the storm might be a bad one, but it would eventually pass...

As she looked about her she remembered her feelings of fear, and that chill ghostly presence, and she wondered if it had had some connection with the plane crash as well as with the hands in the cave. Out of her thoughts, she asked, "Those hands in the cave, Venn - they almost scared me out of my wits. What do they mean?"

"Hands? What hands?" He was frowning in the starlight and she remembered he had never been in this little enclosed valley before. That was strange, because it belonged, presumably, to him. But perhaps when such a tragedy had happened, one would keep away from the place... A minute later she was showing him the cave. He switched on his pocket torch and the beam flashed over the curved surface of the ancient rocks, illuminating the hands that seemed to move faintly - pale stencilled shapes against phased-out patches of red ochre. She saw too what she had not seen before - a scratched-out pattern of cicadas forming almost a frieze above.

Venn uttered a low exclamation. "This must be the sacred ground of the cicada totem! I might have guessed at something of the sort when Roy was so

emphatic about stopping investigations - so certain my sheep had been taken off in a truck. And here - my God, I should have worked it out for myself."

Paddy stared at him questioningly, and putting an arm across her shoulders, he drew her with him closer to the rock face. "This is where the Dreamtime hero lost his physical existence and changed into a rock. Here, on this sacred site, his spirit survives. Do you know about the Dreamtime heroes, Paddy? - half man, half animal, who walked the earth long ago and are now the spirits that preside over various totems.",

Paddy nodded. Yes, she had read of those aboriginal beliefs. "But the hands, Venn - what do they mean?"

"They're to bring their owners into rapport with the Dreamtime beings. They're made by placing the hand on the rock, and blowing ochre from the mouth to form a kind of stencil. Do you understand?" Again she nodded, listening to him in fascination. "From the particular colour of this pigment, I'd say it could have been brought across from Parichilna in South Australia heaven knows how long ago - a special red ochre, greatly coveted, coloured by the blood of a mythical dog and particularly potent." He straightened up and switched off his torch. The white hands were still eerily visible in the dark shadows, and his arm stayed warmly around Paddy's shoulders. "The totem spirits must have warned Roy to keep away, not to interfere. Hence my sheep were spirited away. As they would be again this time, no doubt, if you hadn't disclosed the secret, Paddy Dempster."

And then somehow or other his hands were locked at the back of her waist, and she was looking up into his face.

"Do you remember what you asked me - what I promised you - earlier on?"

The colour flooded quickly into her face and receded. Kiss me - hold me - "I - I shouldn't have said it. It was just -"

"Your passionate nature," he said, his voice low. "We'll have to watch it, won't we? For I believe, despite every thing, that you're still innocent, aren't you? Yet that inviting mouth, those lovely cloudy eyes tell me you know that love can be a physical delight. Wouldn't you give in to me if I were to ask you - here and now, on this warm, totally unreal and almost ended summer night?"

She trembled, knowing that she would, confused as to whether or not she wanted him to ask - afraid of just what he would demand. And at the back of her mind like a whispered warning, a doubt, was the thought of Annette.

"It wouldn't be fair to ask anything of you," Venn said on a breath, after a long moment when they looked at each other and she seemed to see him as clearly as though he were lit by some dazzling and crystalline light. The pores of his skin, the darkness of his jaw where he needed a shave, the indentations at the corners of his mouth. The colour of his eyes - the intense colour. They were like blue flowers, all warmth and desire... But it was absurd that she should think to see him like this when there was only faint starlight and the

glimmer of coming dawn in the sky that hung over the little grassy valley with its cache of stolen sheep. Yet still she had seen him, and his eyes looking down at her had seen her with the same clarity. She knew it instinctively, and it seemed, to mean something.

With a sudden exclamation that was almost a groan, he had crushed her to him and his lips against her mouth were passionate. She clung to him while his fingers traced the length of her arms, touched lingeringly against her hip bones, her thighs. And then, though their bodies were still close, welded, his mouth was away from hers and his voice came low and tense:

"Are you afraid, little one, that the animal in me - the demanding insatiable male - has taken over? It would be so easy to subjugate you - and it would be so immoral. I shan't do it now, but it's what I'm going to do eventually if you stay long in the outback. You know that, don't you? My God, I want you so much I could take you right now...'

Paddy stayed passive, trembling. It was as if she couldn't move. Her body felt sensitive as the string of a violin, tight, taut, and she knew the deep ache of desire for a man. She hung suspended in time, waiting on the edge of agony for some exquisite and releasing fusion.

When he let her go gently, gradually, tears stung in her eyes blinding her, her body was agonized, unsatisfied, and she shivered uncontrollably. She wanted to beseech him once more, "Kiss me - don't let me go - take me, love me-" And she wanted to say too, "I love you, Venn". But she held back the

words, they remained in her heart, and later, looking back, remembering, she thanked heaven.

Love? Or passion - madness?

CHAPTER NINE

THE sky was paling rapidly and the small flecks of cloud that floated high above flashed scarlet like the fire in white opals as Venn and Paddy rode back together to Bibbenluke. Venn made Paddy promise to say nothing to anyone about those sheep or the hidden pastures or meeting him there.

"I found you in the mulga forest, if anyone asks," he said. "Is that clear? And you'll let me handle this, and say nothing to Keith or Beth or anyone else at all."

Annette, for instance, thought Paddy. She nodded. "I promise." She was weary and exhausted and all she could think of was how Venn had said "I want you." What did that mean? That he wanted her body - no more and no less. When "I love you" was what she needed to hear from the man to whom she surrendered. She swore to herself that no matter how long she stayed on Bibbenluke, he would find her different from Annette. And just now, she had

an overpowering desire to ask him about Annette - to beg him to tell her the truth. Was he going to marry her? To wonder now was torture, and crazily, it seemed now all too likely to be true. Now that she knew so much more of his passionate nature.

But by what right could she ask? He had held her in his arms but he had given her no claim on him, no rights at all...

"You're not to see Keith this morning," he was saying. "You'll go to bed the minute you reach home - I'll let Beth know you're back. And by the time you wake Keith will be out of the house. There'll be no temptation, no arm twisting. But think about it, Paddy, will you? That you should tell the truth is important to me in more ways than one. Can't you see that?"

"I've told you the truth," said Paddy, not understanding what he meant. She was stupid with weariness. "Keith didn't take your sheep."

He didn't press her further. When at last he saw her into the house, he said in a low and intensely serious voice, "We can never again meet as strangers, Paddy. Somehow we'll have to sort ourselves out."

Paddy practically fell into bed, and slept and slept. When she woke it was late in the morning, and she felt strangely confused. Everything that had happened, the previous night seemed to belong in a dream sequence, completely outside of time, with no rhyme or reason to it. The most real, and yet the most unreal thing of all, was that Venn had made love of a kind to her - verbal love, even physical love, to be remembered with acute agony.

She showered and dressed in jeans and a short-waisted cotton top, brushed her dark hair and thought of Annette. Annette belonged somewhere in the dream sequence too, most definitely, because she had been the shepherdess. Why? To annoy Venn? Out of sheer frustration at his heartlessness? Keith had said Venn wouldn't give Annette the loving she needed. "He will never marry Annette," she thought. It seemed perfectly obvious to her now, but perhaps it wasn't yet obvious to Annette. Paddy felt an icy chill in her heart. Had she fallen in love with a brute?

Yet Venn was not like that, some other part of her reasoned. Venn had self-control - he was responsible. He had not made love to her last night when, as both of them must have known, it would have been so easy. How then did you reconcile the two images? The man she loved and the man she hated.. "So you lost yourself in the mulga forest," Beth said when Paddy appeared on the verandah. Lunch was in progress, and Simon and Margaret were placidly eating cold meat and salad, and drinking orange squash. "Where on earth did you imagine you were going? I got the fright of my life when you didn't come home to dinner. Max went over to the homestead to see what he could find out and no one knew a thing. Annette had gone to bed and was asleep - she hadn't been feeling too well - but Jeanne said neither of them had seen a sign of you."

Paddy pricked up her ears. So Annette had been asleep, had she? She thought she knew better than that. Annette had been out rounding up Venn's sheep and herding them into a hiding place.

"I'm sorry to have been such a bother," she apologized. "I went out for a ride. I didn't mean to go far, but I got sort of lost in my thoughts."

"You should never go out alone without telling someone where you're going, in the outback," said Beth quite severely. "Even Simon knows that."

"And so do I," said Margaret. Both the children were listening wide-eyed and had evidently been made aware of the seriousness of wandering away without a word to anyone.

"I know," said Paddy penitently, and feeling ashamed of her bad example. "I didn't think and then my horse disappeared."

"But the mulga forest! What a ghostly place to be stranded in! Weren't you afraid?"

"It's no use being afraid," said Paddy with a little smile. She didn't know a thing about the mulga forest, so she didn't try to add any details. She did want to know, though, where Keith had been. It would be fine if she could tell Venn and prove to him that she hadn't been sticking up for Keith, but simply telling the truth. She asked casually, "How come Keith didn't come to look for me? Or did he look in the wrong places?"

"Keith wasn't around. Venn sent him out late in the evening to repair one of the fences where a tree had fallen. He was supposed to have done it earlier

in the day, but he forgot." She spoke flatly, but disillusion was plain in her voice. Beth's brother plainly was not going to make the grade at Bibbenluke, and Beth knew it. Paddy was wondering hopefully if the repair job would be a good alibi, and if Keith had got back from that at a reasonable hour when Beth dashed her hopes. "As a matter of fact he stayed the night in the old boundary rider's hut out there and came in early this morning. So he didn't even know you were missing. I was so relieved when Venn brought you home. I knew he would, I have the utmost faith in Venn."

Paddy's heart had sunk. So Keith had been out most of the night. That didn't look too good but Keith wasn't guilty and she didn't see how Venn could prove him to be so. And isn't a man supposed to be innocent till he is proved guilty? It could even be, anyhow, that by this time Annette had told Venn what she had done. She was a very odd girl, and in Paddy's opinion she was going about winning back Venn's attentions in a hopelessly immature and illogical way.

"Did Venn go out again today?" she wondered aloud.

"To check on that fence, I should imagine," Beth said, looking troubled. "But he'd have taken a sleep first."

Paddy had Venn on her mind all afternoon. She didn't have enough energy to take the children for a picnic, their favourite form of entertainment, but she played in the sandheap with them.

"Build Buckingham Palace for us, Miss Dempster," Margaret urged, and Paddy painstakingly, and with the children's help, built a large and very elaborate castle, certainly without much resemblance to Buckingham Palace - and she thought about Venn and all that had happened last night at the Dreamtime place. The more she thought about it the more it seemed to her that it had all happened in a vacuum, or in some world on the edge of nowhere. It had simply not been related to anything that had happened before. Except perhaps that right from the start she had been physically attracted to him.

And physical attraction quite simply accounted for the whole thing.

She was utterly confused to find herself face to face with him later when she went on to the verandah with the children, who were in search of cold drinks. As the door banged shut behind her, she saw him sitting in the green shade of the passionfruit vine that formed a thick screen between the verandah posts.

"Hello, Uncle Venn! We'll get the drinks, Miss Dempster," Margaret carolled, and she and Simon pattered happily off to the kitchen.

Venn got to his feet and he and Paddy looked at each other silently. Paddy felt strangely uncertain of herself, confronted by the expression in his eyes. It was as if - as if they had both dreamed the same dream - her dream - and through it her innermost secrets had been revealed to him. She almost wanted to run away and hide herself.

He didn't smile and she wondered until she discovered that she hadn't smiled either.

"I came to see you, Paddy," he said almost formally. "Shall we sit down?" He pulled forward a chair for her and she took it obediently. He sat down again too and looked at her inscrutably, the green sun-filtered light from the vines making a mystery of his eyes. He took out cigarettes and asked her, "Have you recovered from your night out?"

Paddy swallowed, crossed her legs in their unremarkable denim jeans, and noticed that she was barefoot. She had left her sandals out in the garden. She wished stupidly and futilely that she had put on some make-up today, and when she raised a hand to run nervous fingers through her hair she was rewarded by a shower of sand over her face.

"Yes, thank you. I'm sorry I gave you such a disturbed night."

He sent her a crooked smile. "You might have saved me quite a considerable sum of money, so you needn't apologize... You've kept your promise, of course?"

"Not to talk? Yes."

"Good. By the way, my aunt would like you to come to dinner tonight."

Paddy blinked. She was quite certain Agnes Wildash wouldn't like her to come to dinner. So it must be Venn's idea - because he didn't really trust her not to talk.

"Thank you," she said. "I should like that."

His eyebrows tilted and he drew on his cigarette. Paddy thought it strange that they should be sitting here like this, having this kind of a conversation, when so short a time ago they had been in each other's arms. It was a very unnerving thought, and she jumped slightly when he said levelly, "Why are you protecting Keith so determinedly, Paddy? I find it hard to believe you've fallen in any way for the line he puts across. Have you? Has Phil - this other man - completely ceased to interest you? Or only temporarily?"

Paddy felt confused. She wanted to say, "I don't care a fig about Keith - I'm not protecting him. And Phil means nothing to me." But before she could even begin, his words cut across their unspoken ones.

"It occurs to me it's time someone helped you sort yourself out, and I'm going to tell you one or two facts about Keith that I think you should know. What I'm going to say is not general knowledge and I hope you can keep it to yourself. Keith is not here on Bibbenluke of his own accord or because he wants to make good, as the saying goes. He's here because I've paid off a very considerable debt for him, a fact which up to this moment has been strictly between myself and him. In plain words, it's saved him from a prison term." He paused and Paddy felt faint shock. "Now I don't believe in making a gift of my hard-earned cash to conscienceless opportunists even when they happen to be relatives of my very good friends. While Keith is here working for me, he's paying off his debt. Do you follow me?"

Paddy nodded, embarrassed at his confidences. She didn't need sorting out when it came to Keith, and she felt desperately sorry, for Beth. But Venn needn't have told her any of this.

"But this time," said Venn harshly, "This time it's the finish. I've suffered Keith too long as it is. This time I cut my losses, that's all. After this he goes and I don't want ever to see him again. Beth will have to know exactly why and exactly what sort of trouble he was in before he came here. Women were the least part of it. I'd have put up with his irresponsibility a while longer, but now he's stealing my stock."

Paddy drew a deep breath. Venn was wrong. She didn't know that Keith deserved the opportunity for rehabilitation that Venn had given him, and she didn't want to champion him in any way. She had no tender feelings for him and she wasn't impressed by what she had seen of his performance at Bibbenluke. It was simply a fact that he hadn't done this last thing - he hadn't stolen Venn's stock, even if it had been his idiotic talk that had put ideas into Annette's silly head.

She clenched her fists and hoped that Venn would not misinterpret her motives and she said quietly but firmly, "No matter what you suspect, Venn, it wasn't Keith who brought those sheep into the valley."

Venn leaned towards her, utterly exasperated, his eyes hard. "Didn't you tell me you were asleep? But if you're so damned positive, then who was it? What's the alternative you're offering? Come on now, speak up - you were

there, you can clear it all up in a matter of seconds and save a lot of trouble." He had grasped her arm angrily and she knew she had aggravated him almost beyond endurance. He was so positive and so was she. She could feel his anger like a red thread of fire running along her veins through his hands, and she was aware of the helplessness of her position. She was in a cleft stick. She couldn't accuse Annette. She could only ask Annette to tell Venn the truth. But that didn't help, just now.

She stared fixedly back at Venn and a nervous pulse beat at her temples. Her lips parted, but she could say nothing. Venn was not going to be amused at what Annette had done, and Paddy knew that she had to keep her little nose well out of it. She turned her head aside with a sick feeling. She wasn't making Venn like her any more. It occurred to her now to wonder if Venn had done what he had last night to provide a counter-attraction - to encourage her to confess. It was a disagreeable thought and it was too likely for comfort.

It was only moments later that Keith came on to the verandah to stand looking at Paddy and Venn with an odd smile.

"Hi," he said. "No drinks yet? I'm getting under the shower."

"I see you got that fence mended." Venn sat back in his chair and looked at the other man through half-closed eyes "Did you shift those sheep down to the river herbage?"

"I did," said Keith. And added a somehow insolent "Boss."

There was a second's silence. "Run along and get ready, Paddy," said Venn. For Keith's benefit, he added, "Paddy's coming to dinner at the homestead."

Paddy got up. Keith said, "What about dinner with me tomorrow night, Paddy love?"

Paddy had no idea what to say. She couldn't like Keith. She couldn't see how anyone as nice as Beth ever got to have a brother like that. Or what Annette could see in him - except a picture of herself in his eyes. She said with an attempt at ease, "I'll be in tomorrow night, if that's what you mean."

In her bedroom she tried to look a few facts straight in the face. Venn hadn't come to the bungalow this evening to see her - to feast his eyes on her the way she would like to feast her eyes on him. He had come to make sure she didn't see Keith alone, because he didn't trust her. And to give her another chance to come clean. Now she didn't know what he'd do - how he'd go about proving that Keith had been involved.

At dinner, it was perfectly plain to Paddy that Annette had something on her mind. She was wearing her paua shell necklet, and fingered it constantly and nervily as if to draw attention to where it hung against her breast, revealed by the low neckline of her dress. Her toffee coloured eyes scarcely ever left Venn's face, and there was a curious expression at the back of them - a kind of sullen demand. Paddy marvelled as she looked at those round goofy eyes that Annette had been practical enough to deal with the sheep as she apparently had. Had she done it with the sole purpose of arousing Venn's

anger? How could she ever expect to win him back that way? If she only knew it, her nervous fingering of the tiki had him definitely intrigued. He watched her tonight with narrowed thoughtful eyes, and Paddy wondered about that tiki. Did it mean something special in Annette's life? Or was it simply a charm? She thought Venn was wondering too. If he no longer wanted her for himself, would he be willing to hand her over to someone else?

At that moment Agnes said from her end of the table, "John will be back next week, Venn. And you will be gone, Paddy." There was an unflattering satisfaction in the way she said that. Paddy flinched. Yes, she would be gone, and it was very doubtful whether anyone would care much, except Paddy Dempster herself.

Venn's attention switched from Annette to Paddy, and he commented, "So time's nearly up." Paddy flushed as her eyes met his, and she felt that quick odd contact with the man himself that was so incomprehensible and seemed to go so deep.

"And the girls," said Agnes, shifting her water glass a little. "Jeanne must soon go back to Sydney and her work -"

"And the boy-friend you've been telling me about, eh, Jeanne?" said Venn, and Jeanne smiled her pretty docile smile and nodded.

"I'll make the trip down to Sydney one of these days and meet him," Venn promised.

"Annette must stay, of course," said Agnes.

"Must?" Venn shot her a frowning look. "This time I think we'll leave Annette to make her own decisions. We'll talk about that later, Annette but not while we have a guest."

A guest, thought Paddy. An outsider. Who, however much her senses had been titillated, did not belong in any way. She wondered with a jealous pang what kind of a talk Venn and Annette would have and what was the other decision that Annette had not been left to make alone. Now she couldn't miss the sudden flash of defiance in Annette's round eyes as her fingers sought the paua shell once again. She looked more than ever like a precocious schoolgirl and it was crazy to recall what she had been up to last night.

"I did dream it," thought Paddy suddenly. It simply wasn't feasible.

They were about to have coffee when Venn pushed back his chair. "No coffee for me, thanks, Agnes. I have some work to attend to. I hope you'll all excuse me." He looked straight into Paddy's eyes. "You'll have to forgive me if I don't see you home. Don't make it a late night, will you - after last night's adventure."

He went, and Paddy felt she had been stranded. It had been his invitation, though he had said it was his aunt's, and now he was walking out on her. She thought, "I'll go as soon as I've had coffee."

Jeanne, passing the sugar, asked, "What happened to you last night, Paddy? I was so relieved when I woke up this morning and Venn said you'd been found. Where had you got to?"

Was Annette listening with a rather particular answer for Paddy's answer? Or was that being too imaginative? Paddy said as lightly as she could, "I went for a ride, and when I dismounted to look around, my horse bolted."

"Where were you?" Annette persisted.

"In the mulga forest," she said uncomfortably.

They all stared at her.

"Where on earth is that?" asked Jeanne.

Paddy shrugged. "Search me. I haven't the faintest idea. I was completely lost." She changed the subject quickly. "Are you better now, Annette? I believe you weren't too well last night."

"It was just a bad headache." Annette's eyes were wide and round and innocent. Strangely, it was Jeanne who blushed and asked nervously if anyone wanted more coffee. She had been covering up for Annette when she said her sister was asleep in her bed. Probably she thought Annette was going out to meet Keith. But Keith had spent the night in the boundary rider's hut. Or had he?

Paddy had a sudden uneasy feeling that she had made a bad mistake somewhere along the line. Hadn't there been two black shadows in her dream - two horses? But only one rider. Or she had seen only one rider. Suddenly she felt sick. She had told Venn so positively that it had not been Keith, when by rights she should not have been positive at all. She wished now that she hadn't been so completely dopey. She should have forced herself to

wake up. Oh, what a fool you've been, Paddy Dempster! She knew that she must see Venn and tell him the truth.

Abruptly she rose from the table. "Please excuse me, Miss Wildash. I'd like an early night."

Agnes got up from the table too. "By all means leave us, Paddy. I'm sure you're not very interested in an all-female gathering. No doubt Keith will be happy to welcome you back."

Paddy looked at her quizzically. She had spoken so gently, so politely, but she was not being polite at all. Well, Paddy knew she wasn't popular with Miss Wildash, so she shrugged it off. She would act as though she were so thick-skinned she wasn't aware of the rudeness, the sarcasm.

"No doubt he will be. Good night, and thank you for the dinner. Good night, Annette - Jeanne."

Nobody saw her to the door and she went quickly away to look for Venn. She would tell him exactly what had happened as far as she knew - she would make a clean breast of it. And then he could question Annette.

But Venn was nowhere to be found. He wasn't in the office and he wasn't on the verandah. She walked right round the house to make sure, and finally she asked Millie who could only tell her, "Boss gone, out, Paddy."

Frustratedly, she went back across the gravel without seeing him.

Max had gone to bed when she got back to the bungalow, but Beth was in the kitchen making a final pot of tea.

"You're back early Paddy." She sounded and looked tired. "Did Venn send you home to get some sleep?"

Paddy said yes, though it wasn't true. She didn't ask where Keith was. She didn't want to know. She took a cup of tea to her bedroom and drank it sitting in the dark. She felt singularly alone, aware as she had not been for a long time that she had no one in the world to call her own. Norma, her stepmother, rarely wrote; she had made a new life for herself in England; and because of what had happened between herself and Phil, she could no longer feel herself of any particular interest to Mrs. Kennedy. She had written to Phil to tell him quite positively, but as kindly as she could, that there was no point in taking up their friendship again. If Phil was hurt, she couldn't help it. He had hurt her - and because of that he had now laid himself open to the same kind of hurt. How complicated human relationships are, thought Paddy. How much suffering we can cause one another.

When at last she got into bed, she lay awake for a long time, her mind going over and over what she would tell Venn when she saw him tomorrow. She was aware of a deep sense of disturbance. Perhaps it would be good to be back at work again, concentrating on a new class of sixyear-olds. Time would pass, new things would happen, she would make new friends. Nothing ever stands still, she reminded herself...

Then she had drifted into sleep and Venn - Venn was holding her hand, and he placed it beside his against the surface of a flat smooth rock. And from

nowhere red ochre - "stained by the blood of a mythical dog' he told her - was blown, and the shapes of her hand and Venn's were imprinted on the rock. But when they took their hands away, Venn's was clean and hers was red as blood, and as she pulled it from the rock she was crying hysterically, "It wasn't Keith - there was never anyone but you - never!" And then, just as Venn stooped to her and she was about to feel, miraculously, the touch of his lips, she woke.

She was perspiring and her heart was beating heavily as though she had had a bad fright. She reached out and groped for the switch of the bed lamp, knocking over her cup and saucer as she did so and adding to her feeling of panic. She had the feeling that she must wake up fully - must escape from the dream that was still haunting her. When her eyes grew accustomed to the light, she discovered she was holding her left hand out and staring at it. It was white, unstained, and she heard herself say half aloud, "Thank God." She had put her feet to the floor without being aware of it, re-buttoned the top of her brief cotton pyjamas, and was telling herself firmly that all she needed was a glass of water from the bathroom, when something made her look at the french doors. She had heard some infinitesimal sound as of a board creaking.

As she looked up a man appeared there. A man with blood on his face and on his shirt. With blood on the hand he raised to push back his dusty tousled hair.

Paddy's heart flew into her mouth.

"Venn!" Barefooted, she flew across the room to him. "Oh, Venn, what's happened? Her voice was a husky appalled whisper as her eyes searched his face. "The blood came from a cut on his cheekbone, another at the side of his jaw, and his eyes, though one was swollen, were still a dazzling blue and they looked at her quizzically. "Oh, let me help you - where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"I've been fighting," he said dryly. "Isn't it obvious? I've just come up from the men's quarters where I've been patching up your hero and giving him something to help him sleep. We met in the valley, where he'd gone to manoeuvre my sheep." His eyes looked at her steadily, accusingly. "You lied to me to protect a scoundrel, Paddy Dempster, and I wish to God I knew why. That you're in love with him - or in league with him - I find hard to believe, but perhaps I misjudged you." His hand strayed momentarily to the cut on his cheek from which the blood continued to trickle, and Paddy found she was concentrating more on his condition than on what he was saying. Her heart was torn to see him like this, and her fingers itched to soothe - to cleanse - to heal. "Did you know Annette was mixed up in this too? What the devil do you know? One thing you can thank yourself for - you're responsible for this fight and for the fact that Keith's been beaten up. Had you been on the side of right - or even, shall we put it, on my side - it would never have come to this. If you want to weep over him, now's the time, because he'll be on his way out tomorrow, whether he walks or whether he crawls."

He had spoken slowly with long pauses, but Paddy had said nothing. Nothing at all. Those second thoughts that had come to her tonight had been right - of course they had. But they had come too late. Annette had been with Keith, and Venn knew that now, for Keith had told him, probably thinking that Annette had betrayed him. Sheep stealing was a contemptible business. But oh, what a fool she had been! - to have been so definite, so positive,, that Keith was not implicated.

She spoke at last, her voice low and shaken. "All I can say, Venn, is that I was half asleep. I really was. But it's no good protesting - I don't expect you to believe me."

"I wonder are you still half asleep," he said enigmatically. "I'll leave you to get back to sleep now - if your conscience will allow it." He turned abruptly and she put a detaining hand quickly on his arm, an arm that was sticky with dust and sweat.

"Venn, your face - your wounds-"

He turned back and looked down at her mockingly. "Are you concerned about my wounds? You don't need to be. I'll deal with them myself - that was my intention. I came here because I saw your light. My aunt needn't be implicated in this and tomorrow is soon enough to rouse Annette. They would both of them have hysterics to see me as I am now." Suddenly his face was grey and unutterably tired.

Paddy said gently, "Sit down, Venn. You do need attention, and I know what to do. I promise I shan't have hysterics. Please."

For a moment she thought he was going to refuse her and then quite suddenly he gave in.

"All right, I'm in your hands. You really want to minister to me, don't you?" Paddy nodded and he grimaced. "You're all woman at a time like this, aren't you? Funny, that... I admit it will be the first time I've had medical attention from a girl in short pyjamas, however, and that's verging on a see-through top you're wearing, Paddy Dempster."

Paddy couldn't smile. It hurt her heart too much to see him the way he was. She fetched a bowl of hot water, and antiseptic and plaster from the bathroom cupboard, and there were tears in her eyes as she swabbed away the drying blood from his face with cotton wool. She was startled when he put out a hand, not yet washed clean and with bruised and bloody knuckles, to touch her pale cheek where the tears had left a trail.

"You're not as tough as you pretend, are you, sweetheart? My bruised and battered flesh isn't pretty, is it? You must feel sickened at the sight of it. I wonder are you doing some kind of penance to atone for your lies as you minister to me so gently."

"It's an act of love," thought Paddy. She had an almost irresistible longing to take him in her arms and lay her head against his chest. He had taken off

his filthy bloodstained shirt, and his chest was bare. Brown, broad, and with a patch of golden hair.

"It's not a penance," she said aloud. "And I didn't lie deliberately, whatever you believe. It was true when I said I was half asleep. Anyhow, I couldn't let you go away like that, with no one to look after you. Fighting is so hideous."

"Men will always fight," he said imperturbably. "On some pretence or another. No woman could have stopped us tonight - not even you. I blamed you for it, but you can forget that. I'd have knocked Keith down even if he hadn't put up his fists first." He said no more till she had covered his cuts with a protective dressing and with plaster, and then he remarked, "I wonder do you wish you'd never come here, Paddy Dempster. I wonder what's going on in that head of yours. I'd give a lot to know."

They looked at each other for a long moment and then he stood up and reached for his shirt, slipped his arms into the sleeves but didn't bother to button it up. "Tomorrow we'll talk. It's not seemly that I should stay any longer in your virginal room. Thanks for your gentle handling."

Paddy looked at him dumbly. He looked better now - more civilized, more cared for. She wanted to tell him again that she hadn't lied deliberately, to explain it all. But there was still Annette's part in it, and she mustn't interfere in that. Besides, she felt it would sound like mere empty excuses. There was nothing for it but to let him go. Unkissed and uncomforted, she thought rather absurdly.

She didn't know what she was walking to the next morning. It turned out to be a black day. At some unmentionably early hour Venn must have come to the bungalow to talk to Beth and Max - long before Paddy was anywhere near conscious. She simply didn't see Keith again. He wasn't interested in saying good-bye to her and she wasn't sorry. It would have been quite pointless. But from the verandah as she went round to breakfast she saw someone - probably Jim - driving off in one of the station cars, and Keith sat beside him in the front seat. Max had gone, but Beth was standing by the breakfast table where Margaret and Simon sat innocently eating their cereal.

The two women looked at each other and Paddy's heart was wrung. Beth looked so small and vulnerable, and today she looked ten years older. She said quite simply, "Keith's gone, Paddy. I can't talk about it now. Later perhaps. He's spoilt his chances of leaving here with a good reference. He's a fool. I hope my brothers will take him on at the stock and station agency. It looks like his last chance."

She didn't eat any breakfast and after a cup of coffee went outside and chipped away dementedly at her block of stone, which was at last beginning to assume a form recognizable as a mother and child - simplified and massive.

The day passed somehow and Paddy was thankful for the children, who behaved exactly as they did on any other day.

Annette walked over to the bungalow during the afternoon.

"Aunt Agnes says Keith has gone, and that Venn's been in a fight. What's it all about?"

Paddy looked at her curiously. She appeared so innocuous as she stood in the tree shade in her long faded blue cotton skirt and white blouse, the paua shell amulet hanging against her breast, her rounded amber eyes shaded by the white cotton hat. "She is completely superficial. Completely self-absorbed," thought Paddy involuntarily. Yet that wasn't altogether true. Every human being has feelings and emotions, triumphs and hopes and fears, though some don't go so deep as others. Annette was one of the shallow ones, that was all. She lived right on the surface of things. She was like a butterfly skimming over a pool, seeing only its own reflection...

Paddy said, "Don't you know what it's about, Annette? Can't you even guess why Venn and Keith would have a fight?"

Annette's eyes looked at her innocently. "They might fight over me," she conjectured. "Venn hates me even to look at another man."

Paddy shook her head the merest fraction. "They didn't fight over you," she said slowly.

A curious look of satisfaction came over Annette's face. "Venn must have found out that Keith hid some of his precious sheep, then I knew he'd find out - I told Keith-"

She bit her lip suddenly and said no more.

"It's all right, I know you went along too," said Paddy unemphatically. "But why, Annette? Didn't it strike you that it was disloyal to Venn?"

The other girl sat down on the chair Paddy had vacated and crossed her legs. "You know it all, don't you, Paddy Dempster? I suppose Venn told you. Everything's gone wrong since you came here. Aunt Agnes said you'd upset Venn and spoilt his mood... And I wasn't being disloyal anyhow. I knew Venn would find out before it was too late. I know he'll be angry too - with me. Some way he's got to be stirred up, for his own good. He's got a splinter of ice in his heart like Kay in The Snow Queen and he needs me to melt it. I've always reminded him of Peggy, you see, ever since I was a chid. Aunt Agnes says so."

It sounded like a lot of nonsense to Paddy, who suspected that much of the blame for Annette's foolishness could be laid at Agnes Wildash's door. But surely this latest foolishness was Annette's own idea, and it was a little pitiful. It was such a clumsy way to try to win a man back. Annette had absolutely none of the techniques of an Eve who knows the best way to lead her man to the altar, neither did she appear to have any of the intuition of a sensitive girl in love. The only trick Paddy had ever seen her use that had any ingenuity in it - and perhaps it was not a trick at all but merely an unconscious gesture - was that habit she had of touching the paua shell tiki. Which she was doing now. That made Venn thoughtful. Paddy had remarked it herself. just then, Annette's fingers were stilled as they fondled the small gleaming shell, and a

change came over her face. She got languorously to her feet and, turning her head slightly, Paddy saw Venn coming towards them over the grass. In a moment he was beside them and the eyes of both the girls were fixed on him. He looked infinitely better this evening, Paddy saw, relieved. There was a patch of plaster under one eye and another on his jawline, but the swelling round his eye had gone down considerably, though it was still discoloured. It was hard to remember what a shocking bloodied sight he had been last night. Paddy drew a trembling breath and knew she had paled.

Venn had been looking at her searchingly, but now his gaze switched to Annette, who wore a look of feverish expectancy. His aquamarine eyes were coldly accusing.

"Well, Annette?"

Annette bit her lower lip as though to keep back a smile.

"You've been in a fight, Venn. Aunt Agnes said you had."

"And you can guess who I've been fighting with, can't you, Annette?" Venn said with dangerous pleasantness. "And you know exactly why..."

"No, I don't know why," Annette said after a second. "It isn't all that serious, was it? You didn't have to send Keith away-"

Venn's eyes blazed angrily. "That's one thing I should have done long ago - even before you started playing your games. But let's hear your version of this particular incident. Come on now - Keith told me you were involved - in fact

he thought you'd informed on him, that's how much he trusted you. So what was it all in aid of?"

Annette's golden eyes widened. "It wasn't in aid of anything. I only did it for a yell. We went out in the dark with Trixie and rounded up a few sheep and put them in a little valley - out near where the plane crashed. That's all. I knew you'd find those sheep, Venn. You're a lot smarter than Keith - I knew you'd win."

"You knew, did you, Annette? Well, I didn't win last time," said Venn savagely. "I damn well lost. And I nearly lost this time too. If you think it's an amusing game - a "yell", as you put it - to steal stock, then you're even less mature than I suspected. I wonder, will anything make you grow up? If you want my opinion, it's a pity my misguided aunt dragged you out of the mess you'd got yourself into in Sydney and brought you here to me. And it was a damn great shame you ever fell off that horse. If you hadn't, I promise I'd have accompanied you to Auckland personally. Meanwhile, if you persist in acting like a child you can expect to be treated like one."

And then he did exactly what Annette had been angling for. He completely lost his temper. He took hold of her and shook her and shook her until she was bewildered, and Paddy heard herself calling out urgently, "Stop, Venn - don't-"

Venn let go of the girl abruptly and glared down at her, still angry. Her cotton hat was askew and her cheeks were bright red. She stared back at him

and then she stuttered out, "I hate you, Venn Wildash! And I always thought you were so - so wonderful."

"You were wrong, weren't you?" said Venn cruelly.

Suddenly Annette burst into tears and ran stumbling away, tripping over her long skirt.

So much for melting the ice in his heart, thought Paddy, shaken. She looked nervously at Venn, who was completely ignoring her. Without a glance in her direction he said violently, "What a hell of a summer!" and then he too marched off. Whether to pacify Annette or not, Paddy had no idea.

After a moment she went slowly inside to her room. She still felt shaken - but surely not as shaken as Annette! - and she thought about what Venn had said. She knew now that some of the things Keith had told her about Annette when she first came to Bibbenluke had been true, and that others had been utterly false. Annette had been in trouble, but the man in the case was not Venn. Of course it wasn't! How could she ever have believed it could be? - that Venn could be so callous, so irresponsible. It was clear, too, that Agnes Wildash wanted beyond all reason to see her nephew and Annette married, and that she was largely responsible for the fact that Annette clung persistently to her schoolgirl crush on her unofficial and romantic guardian.

To know the truth at last was a relief, and yet Paddy couldn't help being sorry for Annette. Poor girl - she was certainly having problems in learning to cope with adult life!

CHAPTER TEN

NOT unnaturally, life proceeded quietly for the next couple of days, and there was little communication between the two houses. Paddy knew that Johnny Heath had returned and that the Duncan girls were still there, but otherwise she knew nothing of what was happening.

One evening she wandered restlessly into the garden, reflecting that in a very few days' time Bruce Cale would be coming to fetch her and Margaret and she would be leaving. Deep in her heart, she knew she expected something of Venn before then. Too much had happened between them to remain unresolved and now she knew that he was not likely to be making either of the Duncans a permanent fixture at Bibbenluke she had all sorts of hopes that she kept hidden even from herself. On this particular evening, she felt strung up to an almost unbearable tension. She had the jittery, nervy feeling that something was going to happen.

And she was so right, as she discovered not much later.

When Venn appeared, walking towards her through the tamarisk trees, her heart gave a bound of expectancy and joy, and she kept on in his direction steadily. "Hello, Paddy. I was hoping to find you. Are you all right?

You're looking pale." His blue eyes examined her quickly and thoroughly. "Is out heat too much for you?"

Faint colour tinged, her cheeks as she shook her head.

"I've got used to the heat. I'm reasonably adaptable." She stopped. Was that rather a - leading remark to have made? she wondered in alarm. A rather too obvious "Come on' signal? She hadn't meant it that way.

"The young are adaptable," he agreed. "And twenty-two is very young... I'm thirteen years your senior: Does that sound - too old to you?"

Her heart leapt. Too old for what? She bit back the question. "It's not old at all."

He smiled watchfully. "School will be starting again soon. You'll - stay on at Gidgeemallawa? Or' - he paused infinitesimally as though to choose his phrase - "do you have plans for going to Sydney?"

To Phil, he meant, and she coloured, remembering that rather gaudy card and the sentimental message. "No plans for Sydney," she said. "I haven't heard that I'm to be moved, so I'll still be at Gidgee." Her throat was unexpectedly dry and she spoke huskily, unable to return his smile and appearing over-solemn, she was sure.

He nodded. He had taken up his favourite position, one hand against a tree trunk. With the other hand he was fishing for cigarettes. It was close on the end of the day, the air was still and very warm, and Paddy, looking down, heart hammering, could see a line of large sugar ants hurrying through

their tasks before the darkness came. She watched the grass blades tremble with their goings and comings, and she knew that Venn was watching her.

"You haven't had much to say about Keith's departure," he remarked, and she looked up. "I hope you haven't acquired anything in the nature of a broken heart while you've been here."

The ridiculous reply came into her mind, "Not yet - but it could still happen'... She said a simple "No," then hurried on while she had the opportunity, "Venn, I'd like to explain about that lie you thought I told you. I didn't see Keith that night - I - I only saw Annette, and it seemed so crazy I thought I must have been dreaming. Then - the sheep were there, so I knew I hadn't been." She paused and looked at him doubtfully. He was listening intently, his eyes on her face.

"I see," he said when she didn't go on. "Well, that sounds plausible enough."

There was a short silence. Paddy, with that silly leap of the mind, imagined he was thinking, "You're improving. That's one of your better excuses." It was unnerving to think that way, and she wanted to enlarge on what she had said - to convince him. But there was such a thing as protesting too much and she was relieved when he changed the subject:

"Do you remember our first encounter? I didn't take to you at all - nor you to me, I shouldn't imagine."

Paddy gave a slight grimace. "You did make me rather angry. You didn't seem to believe a word I said."

"That's right. I think I was on the point of throwing you out bodily. I flashed my light on you and what did I see? A seductive little female creature, all grey eyes and flipped-up black hair - and apparently half undressed. Another amorous adventure for Keith leading to God knows what strife. If I could have snapped my fingers and made you vanish, I'd have done it on the spot. But life isn't like that, is it? And then you turned up at Bibbenluke." He looked at her thoughtfully. "I'm still not sure why I let you stay, but I kept my eye on you."

"I know that," said Paddy, relaxing a little. "You were always watching me."

"Weren't you watching me too?" he asked quizzically.

Paddy met his eyes and the very marrow in her bones seemed to melt, to tell her, "This, is it - this is the moment you've been waiting for -"

But whether it was or not she was never to know, for there was the sound of a motor, of wheels crunching on gravel, and with a frown, Venn moved away from his tree trunk and said irritably, "Who the devil is that? It can't be Bruce Cale - he's not due here for three days yet. Sounds like his car, though. We'd better go and see."

He had said "we", so Paddy went back with him through the garden. "We'll finish our talk later," he promised, his hand under her elbow.

It was Bruce Cale. Margaret, followed by Simon, had come racing round the house to the gate, and Margaret scampered eagerly across the gravel, and threw herself into her father's arms.

"Daddy, you've come early!"

The little smile that had risen spontaneously to Paddy's lips froze suddenly. Another man had climbed out of the car and it was - oh no, it couldn't be! - it was Phil Kennedy, and he was coming straight towards her!

"Paddy darling-"

The colour drained from her face and she closed her eyes in utter disbelief. Then his hands were on her shoulders and he kissed her - on the mouth.

"Are you surprised? I had to come. I'm a bad letter writer, and I love you."

Paddy opened her eyes. Over his shoulder she could see Venn watching her - cynically - through a haze of cigarette smoke. Eyes narrowed, dark brows perfectly level, a lock of dark blond hair falling across his forehead. Somehow that lock of hair wrenched at her heart.

Phil had taken her hand in his and swung round to look across at Venn. "Is this the rich squatter you threatened me with, Paddy?"

Paddy's one wish was that she could die at once.

Venn's lip curled in a kind of smile. "So rich squatters have their uses... I take it you're the Sydney man - Phil. Paddy hasn't told us your other name. I'm Venn Wildash."

"Kennedy," said Phil, grinning and confident. The two men shook hands. Bruce Cale said blithely, "Pleasant surprise, Miss Dempster? I seem destined to play Cupid in your young life, don't I? Remember that packet I brought out earlier on? This bloke of yours arrived in Gidgee yesterday and was inquiring

round the town for some way to get out to Bibbenluke station. Remembering my own lovelorn days I took pity on him."

They had all begun to move back to the Lewises' garden, Venn as well. Bruce said, "We'll fetch our luggage later, Phil. Right now a drink is what we need - for you, second only to a lover's kiss. I've been hearing all about you in the car, Paddy. I always had a good opinion of Marg's schoolteacher, but now-" He whistled softly and Paddy writhed. It was like a nightmare.

A nightmare that she seemed helpless to end. It proved practically impossible to change the appearance of things. Max, fresh from the shower, had come on to the verandah with Beth, there were greetings and more introductions. Phil was Paddy's "young fellow". "Oh well, Marg's going up into another class this year, she'd have had a new teacher anyhow." And Paddy couldn't say, "You've got it all wrong - I don't even want to see Phil." Not while Phil was looking at her the way he was, and after he had told Bruce Cale all about her in the car. Drinks were brought and the talk was of Irene and the new baby and Phil and Paddy were more or less isolated. Venn sat further along the verandah, a glass of beer in his hand. Occasionally he sent Paddy a sardonically thoughtful look, and she imagined herself saying loudly and clearly, "Why did you come, Phil? I told you it was all over. .

Meanwhile, Phil was telling her intently and seriously that it was unbelievably wonderful to see her again and that he was certain everything was going to work out splendidly.

"But it won't," said Paddy, and her voice was low and intent too. "I told you, Phil - it's no good. And I meant it."

Venn had left his chair and moved still further along the verandah to fetch an ashtray or more beer. His back was turned to Paddy - deliberately, she felt - and when he sat down again it was further away. He didn't want to listen in on what she and Phil were saying to each other, that was clear. She wondered miserably what he had been going to say to her in the garden before Bruce and Phil came. Probably nothing important. Why on earth had she had that impression? It was mere wishful thinking. She wasn't even listening to Phil any longer, and now became aware that he was insisting she should answer some question.

"What?" she asked stupidly.

"I said won't you find it a relief to get away from here and be back in Sydney where it's civilized and there are beaches and theatres and people, and a bit of life?"

Paddy shook her head. "I like it here. I love it. And I shan't be coming back," she added positively. "I haven't been moved from Gidgeemallawa."

"Then apply for a transfer. Paddy, you must! Look, I love you. I've said it already and I meant it. When you went away I just missed you so much I didn't know what to do, and Diana was there and so - well, we got a bit carried away. But it's all over - and neither of us is brokenhearted. You can just forget it."

Paddy looked at her hands and said nothing. She would have liked to get up and walk away. The trouble was, she felt sorry for Phil.

"Look," Phil said, "I won't try to rush you. I'll stay around till school goes back and you've applied for a transfer to Sydney. Right?"

"Paddy, some more lemonade?" Paddy looked up and Venn was gazing down at her. Not mockingly or sardonically, but with a cool impersonal pleasantness. His eyes were as hurtfully blue as ever, and the red light of sunset striking through the verandah caught one side of his hair, his cheekbone with its new scar, the tips of his lashes. She took the glass he handed her with a lowvoiced "Thank you," and he smiled fractionally. He turned his attention to Phil, topping up his glass of beer for him with some genial remark. He had said he had been watching her, and he was watching her still, on and off, and she didn't know what he was thinking. Only now she had an uneasy feeling that he had summed her up and was dismissing her. "Good-bye, Paddy Dempster. I wasn't so wrong in my first estimate of you, was I? You're a baggage... But no hard feelings. You didn't fool me any more than Keith fooled you."

"I must take a course in mind-reading," Paddy thought stupidly.

The rest of the evening passed somehow - mainly because the pressure was released when Venn excused himself and said he must get home to dinner, and spread the news.

"When do you take off?" he asked Bruce. "Will you be with us for a few days?"

"Afraid not. We'll be off in the morning - at dawn. I've reunited the lovers and Marg will be safe for a few days with our neighbours - they came back from the coast at the week-end."

Venn nodded. "Come over to the homestead after dinner - you and Beth and Max - and we'll have a bit of a talk." He turned to where Paddy and Phil sat together. "I'll say goodbye," he told Phil, holding out his hand. "I don't expect I shall be up at dawn to see you go, and I'm sure you'd prefer to have Paddy to yourself tonight rather than battle with a roomful of people you'll never meet again. You two must have a lot to talk about... Nice to have met you."

"And me," thought Paddy, feeling the misery of tears behind her eyes.

"Good-bye, Paddy." He actually stooped and kissed her on the cheek. "It's been great to have you with us for a little while. Did I hear Phil say you're going to apply for an immediate transfer to Sydney? Invite me to the wedding, won't you? though I can't promise to come."

He turned away and was gone, and for Paddy the light had left the sky.

All too soon the children were in bed and the others had strolled across to the homestead and she and Phil were left alone on the verandah.

"I bet you got more than a peck on the cheek from your virile squatter once or twice in all the time you've been here, Paddy," Phil said. "I didn't like the way he looked at you."

Paddy clenched her fists and took a deep breath. "Look, Phil, Venn Wildash doesn't come into this, but you've got to understand I meant what I wrote. You should never have come here."

"You're hurt."

"I was hurt. I'm not any more. All you've done coming here is-" She stopped, about to say, "deprive me of three more days of Venn Wildash's company - days in which anything could happen." She changed it to, "All you've done is to confirm my feelings. I like you, Phil, but that's no reason for me to want to transfer to Sydney. I'm going to stay in Gidgee, and that's final. And I'm sorry," she finished, getting determinedly to her feet, "but I'm not going to argue ,with you any more. You'll have to accept what's happened and forget me. I managed it when you wrote me that letter. Now it's your turn."

Phil was on his feet too. "Are you paying me out? What do you want me to do? I can't turn back the clock altogether. I lost my head over Diana for a while and I've admitted it. I'm not asking you what you've been up to while you've been in the bush. Can't we kiss and" - he flung out his hands helplessly - "Paddy, I love you. I'm asking you to marry me."

"Too late," thought Paddy, feeling sorry for him. She had wanted that more than anything in the world once. Now she wasn't interested. She had met Venn Wildash and discovered how terrible and how wonderful love could be.

"No, Phil," she said quietly. "It's no use." She went quickly away and he didn't follow her, but she wasn't sure he was altogether convinced.

All the same, she would have to go tomorrow. She hadn't been asked to stay any longer and she had to be back in Gidgee when term started. It wasn't as if there were a bus she could catch or anything like that.

Beth had promised to wake her in the morning, and she began carefully and methodically to pack her suitcase. She wondered if Mrs. Frank was back from the coast or if she would have to spend a couple of nights at the hotel, but try as she would she couldn't keep her mind on practical matters. She didn't really care very much what happened when she got back to Gidgeemallawa. All she could think of was the fact that she'd never see Venn again - that she would leave him with the impression that she'd been 'holding out' on them. That was how Beth had put it laughingly before dinner, when she and Paddy were alone.

"You've been holding out on us, Paddy. And here was I thinking you had no particular friends of your own in Australia. I even wondered for a while," she added more soberly, "if you might fall in love with Keith. You'd have been so good for him." Then the others had come into the dining-room and Paddy hadn't even had a chance of trying to explain things to Beth.

So now there was nothing to do but go, and pretty soon everyone at Bibbenluke would forget there had ever been a girl called Paddy Dempster there for a few weeks one hot summer. Venn would marry - maybe he would marry that woman Beth had referred to once, Sara Lingard. Jeanne would go back to her boy-friend in Sydney, and Annette - what would become of Annette? Paddy didn't suppose she would ever know...

She fell asleep quickly once she got to bed, early though it was. Emotion can be more exhausting than anything. She didn't even dream. But she woke later on and immediately was overwhelmed with a sick sense of despair. She could see by the luminous dial of the bedroom clock that it was twelve-thirty. The house was silent and dark, everyone must have come back from the homestead and gone to bed. Paddy lay awake and could not sleep again, she was too conscious of the oppressive heat now, and she pushed back the sheet that covered her. The thought that she would never see Venn again gnawed and gnawed at her mind until it had become totally insupportable.

She had to see him. Just once.

The crazy thought came into her mind that he might be wakeful too - unable to sleep. She could picture him standing on the homestead verandah staring out into the starlit night. She saw him walk restlessly up and down - then open the gauze door and go down the steps. Pace through the garden to the gate. Start across the gravel. And in the middle of the gravel square he encountered Paddy and they went straight to each other's arms...

So convinced had she been by her own imagination that somewhere during this fantasy she had actually slipped out of bed. Now she buttoned on the skirt she had left out to wear in the car tomorrow - feverishly pulled her pyjama top over her head, heard a button fly off and land on the floor. She reached for her cotton blouse in the almost dark, slipped it on, groped for her sandals. And then she was leaving her room quietly.

There was a moon tonight and it patterned the verandah with stark silver shapes that contrasted with the black shadows. She closed the fly screen door softly behind her. The garden smelled of dry earth and musky flowers, and ahead of her, through the gate, the gravel stretched emptily between the two houses.

He was not there yet.

Not a thing moved, not a mopoke or a dingo called.

Paddy walked slowly, her sandalled feet making a quietly crisp sound that seemed to spread out like ripples in a dark pond. Stars were strung like golden spiders in an invisible web across the sky, and the moon, because there was not a shred of cloud moving, hung still like a lamp. It was a night for love, but Paddy was completely alone in the world. No familiar figure came eagerly towards her and her heart died a little within her. She had believed in her vision so completely.

She reached the homestead gate and opened it, hearing its faint protest. How long ago it seemed since she had first stepped into this garden! It had

been night time then, and Jeanne and Annette had been lounging about on the dark lawn. Now the lawn was empty, and beyond it the homestead crouched amongst its warm shadows in dark and silent sleep. No lights - not even the glow of a cigarette from the verandah. Tears flooded Paddy's eyes and a sob constricted her throat. More than anything in the world she wanted Venn - to be in his arms again - just once.

A minute passed as she stood there blinded by her tears and then she turned away.

This time she went quickly across the gravel, and her shadow hurried forlorn and mockingly ahead of her. She had almost reached the trees where Venn had first kissed her when she realized with a leap of the heart that someone was waiting there.

"Venn!" She said his name on a sob, and the next minute had flung herself into his arms.

She knew at the first instant of contact that it was not Venn. It was Phil.

Neither of them said a word after she had withdrawn. Her cry of "Venn" had said everything that needed to be said...

They left in the morning as planned. Venn did not appear to say good-bye, though Paddy hoped deep in her heart, right up till the last minute, that he might do so. But of course it was better this way. A quick, clean, final break.

A warm hug from Beth, a kiss on the cheek from Max. An invitation to come back 'some day'. Some day - as if she wouldn't be at Gidgee, but hundreds of miles away in Sydney - married to Phil.

Phil was quiet and subdued and she felt sorry for him, and was amazed that no one else appeared to notice anything amiss.

School had been back a fortnight and there was a new male member of the staff who had dated Paddy twice. Every night when she went to bed in her hot little room at Mrs. Frank's - she hadn't moved her bed on to the verandah, because it is easier to hide your tears in private - she reminded herself that she was one day closer to forgetting. Mrs. Frank said her holiday at Bibbenluke hadn't done her much good by the look of her, she was hollow-eyed and she'd lost her appetite. Paddy said it was the heat.

What's the remedy for a broken heart? First you tell yourself it's not broken - it wasn't when Phil dropped her, after all. And then you mix around, you meet new people, like she had done when she went, to Bibbenluke. "It certainly works," Paddy reminded herself bitterly, but all the same when Richard asked her out for a third time, she said "No, thank you" - and wondered if she would finish up an old maid. Well, why not? She could have a cat, or maybe a dog. And that made her think of Trixie - and Keith - and of Venn, Venn, Venn.

It was Friday and she had seen her class out of school and across the red dirt road. Summer was nearly over and this afternoon low dark clouds had

begun to swarm quickly across the sky. It was going to rain - it was going to pour - and if it lasted long it would mean the cycling picnic some of the teachers had planned for tomorrow was off. Paddy thought thank goodness, but at the same time she dreaded a Saturday alone. She went back into the staffroom to sign off and to fetch her hat and some work she was taking home. She thought, "I'll draw a great big poster - a health poster. It will take me all the weekend."

"Better hurry, Miss Dempster," said the headmaster, encountering her in the corridor. "You're going to be caught in a deluge if you don't watch out."

Paddy smiled faintly. That would be a change. The very thought of rain sent shivers down her spine. It hadn't rained since her first week in Gidgee, last spring. And Venn must need rain out at Bibbenluke now, or the dams would dry up and Jeanne and Annette wouldn't be able to swim in the billabong pool.

She switched her mind off forbidden thoughts and started home, but she didn't hurry. It was still too hot for that, despite the cloudy sky, and besides, what was there to hurry for?

A few big drops of rain had fallen by the time she reached Mrs. Frank's, and something within her leapt to life. As the wire gauze door swung shut behind her, Mrs. Frank put her head through the window of the front room where she was giving some child a piano lesson.

"There's someone to see you, Paddy. I told him to wait on the side verandah." There was a teasing look on her face, but before Paddy could ask who her visitor was, she had gone back to her pupil.

Paddy didn't think. She didn't dare to. She walked round the verandah without being conscious of it, and then stopped suddenly.

Venn Wildash got up from the chair where he had been sitting. He smiled at Paddy and his lips moved, but she couldn't hear a word he said. There was a deafening clamour in her ears. She thought it was her heart beating until she realized suddenly that it was rain pelting down on the iron roof. She stood perfectly still, wondering if she were dreaming. She had thought never to see Venn again. Her eyes took in watchfully every little thing about him - the dark gold of his hair, the blue of his eyes - and she looked for two newish scars on his face and discovered them there.

"Why are you here? Where have you come from?" She asked it on a breath, almost with awe - as though she expected to hear that he had stepped straight down from Olympus, from the home of the gods.

He didn't answer her, but he took three long steps and stopped within a foot of her. It was so dark on the verandah now they had to be that close to see each other. That was why he had come so close, Paddy told herself.

Venn said, his eyes on her face, "I've been putting the womenfolk on the train. Jeanne's going to take up modelling again, and Annette-"

Annette, thought Paddy, and her heart failed her a little. "Annette is going to get her trousseau ready and marry Venn after all."

"Annette," Venn said, "is going to New Zealand with Agnes." He paused and his eyes moved over her slowly and she wondered in slight panic, "What do I look like? What sort of mess am I in today - all chalk and ink." "I called in just now to pay my respects to Irene Cale and meet young Andrew," Venn continued carefully. "I was surprised -to hear from Margaret that you were still here. I thought you'd have been in Sydney by now."

"No," breathed Paddy.

He reached out for her left hand and looked at her ringless fingers. Paddy looked too and saw a hand grubby with ink and chalk and was appalled. He said musingly, "I didn't know you were left-handed, Paddy. I've a lot to learn, haven't I?" He didn't let go of her hand.

Her mind was spinning and her thoughts were clamouring against the sound of the rain on the roof - "Oh, kiss me - kiss me-"

Amazingly, it was what he did. Though she hadn't possibly said it aloud, not this time. But his arms were around her and his lips against hers, and then he said on a groan, "Oh, God, I've wanted to do that for so long." There was a tenseness about his face, a whiteness round his nostrils, but his eyes - they were blue flowers, and Paddy felt herself go limp. "I love you, Paddy. I've been sick - demented - since you went away. I was going to ask you to stay - to learn to know me better - and then that man of yours came for you and I could

have choked him. You too, for leading me on, for letting me hope." He stopped and his eyes took her in slowly, hungrily, while she stood perfectly still, not sure if she was imagining it all or if it was really true.

"Why didn't you marry Phil Kennedy?"

"Because I don't love him. Because-"

"Because of me?" His voice was, suddenly rough, demanding. "Have you possibly changed your mind again, Paddy Dempster?"

She shook her head. "Not for a long time," she whispered. "I didn't want Phil to come."

"Yet you said nothing. You went -"

"What else could I do?"

For answer, he kissed her again, and it was excruciating agony and delight, and the sound of the rain was the most beautiful music in the world for lovers. "We make fire together," he said at last. "We make gold - we're alchemists. Isn't it true?" He held her a little away from him and she nodded solemnly. It was true - it had always been true.

Later, Venn said thoughtfully, "I suppose you'd like to know about Annette. I've been in touch with the parents of this student she fell in love with when he was in Sydney last spring. It appears they're reasonably well-to-do, and if Paul wants to marry her I think they'll provide the financial help necessary. Marriage," he said, "is Annette's greatest need - even Agnes agrees to that - and she appears to have quite some feeling for Paul."

Paddy remembered the tiki and nodded. "I hope it works out well," she said.

"Speaking of marriage," he said after a pause, "that's one thing we haven't settled yet. And if you don't say you'll marry me, Paddy Dempster, I shall probably kill you here and now with my bare hands."

"I'm quite safe, then," said Paddy happily, "because I'll marry you, Venn, as soon as you like." Again she was under the spell of those eyes and for a frightening second she wondered, "Shall I ever be able to make up for Peggy?"

As if he had read her mind he put his arms closely around her and said seriously, "I love you, Paddy. You've brought me back to the beautiful shining impossible world of lovers - a thing I thought once could never happen. I want you to be sure that there's nothing in me that belongs in the past or hungers for it, and I'll prove it to you the moment you become Mrs. Venn Wildash and I carry you over the threshold of our home." He stopped and looked at her compellingly. "Now say it, Paddy Dempster - say it." His blue eyes laughed at her as he waited.

"Kiss me, Venn," she said. "Oh - kiss me."